

**NORTH EAST REFERENDUM
BALLOT PACK AND LEAFLET EVALUATION**

**Prepared for COI Communications on behalf of
The Electoral Commission**

**Summary Report of Qualitative Research
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1. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.1 Background

A referendum took place in November 2004 in the North East. Registered voters had the opportunity to vote on the introduction of a regional assembly for the North East region. In addition, residents living within a two-tier authority area were also asked a second question regarding the potential reorganisation of local government in their area (a reorganisation subject to the establishment of a regional assembly). Respondents were sent a ballot pack to vote by post. Assistance and delivery points were also available.

The Electoral Commission and COI Communications commissioned a qualitative research project to explore the effectiveness of the postal ballot paper, supporting materials and leaflet published for use in the North East Referendum.

1.2 Research Objectives

- The purpose of this research was to explore the effectiveness of the North East Referendum postal voting ballot pack in terms of:
 - how respondents interacted with the pack (if and how it was used)
 - the ease with which respondents navigated the pack
 - the accessibility of the language used within the pack (i.e. the instructions provided and links between the two ballot paper questions)
 - the effectiveness of the maps provided
 - respondent awareness and opinions regarding the bar code
 - opinions on the need for a witness statement
 - whether or not respondents sought advice (or were intending to seek advice) and, if so, from which source
- The effectiveness of the leaflet was also explored in terms of tone, comprehension, content, format, visuals, respondent navigation and usage

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method adopted was individual qualitative face-to-face depth interviews of one-hour duration. A total of 32 interviews were conducted with a sample of those registered to vote in the North East Referendum.

The sample was segmented by gender, age, socio economic group and included a mix of those who voted and did not vote in the North East Referendum. The sample (in brief) was segmented as follows:

- Equal mix of male/female (16 interviews male, 16 interviews female)
- A mix of respondents from different socio economic backgrounds (16 interviews with ABC1 respondents, 16 interviews with C2DE respondents)
- A mix of ages recruited according to the following age segments: 8 interviews with those aged 18-24 years old, 8 interviews with those aged 25-35 years old, 8 interviews with those aged 36-50 years old and 8 interviews with those aged over 51 years old
- The sample was biased towards those who voted in the North East Referendum (20 interviews). The remainder (12 interviews) did not vote in the Referendum. Those who did not vote in elections at all were excluded
- A spread of education status, covering both higher and lower levels of educational achievement was achieved across the sample
- A mix of attitudes towards voting was also achieved

All respondents were recruited according to the following additional criteria:

- All were currently on the electoral register and were therefore eligible to vote in the North East Referendum
- None had taken part in active campaigning prior to the North East Referendum

Research was conducted in four locations (all within two-tier authorities): Easington Village (County Durham), Chester-le-Street (County Durham), Alnwick (Northumberland) and Hexham (Northumberland) between 15th and 25th November 2004.

The sample in detail follows:

Depths 1 and 2:	Male, ABC1, 18-35 years old, voter
Depth 3:	Male, ABC1, 18-35 years old, non voter
Depths 4 and 5:	Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, voter
Depth 6:	Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, non voter
Depth 7:	Male, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter
Depth 8:	Male, ABC1, 51+ years old, non voter
Depth 9:	Male, C2DE, 18-35 years old, voter
Depth 10:	Male, C2DE, 18-35 years old, non voter
Depths 11 and 12:	Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter
Depth 13:	Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, non voter
Depths 14 and 15:	Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter
Depth 16:	Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, non voter
Depth 17:	Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, voter
Depth 18:	Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, non voter
Depths 19 and 20:	Female, ABC1, 36-50 years old, voter
Depth 21:	Female, ABC1, 36-50 years old, non voter
Depth 22 and 23:	Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter
Depth 24:	Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, non voter
Depth 25 and 26:	Female, C2DE, 18-35 years old, voter
Depth 27:	Female, C2DE, 18-35 years old, non voter
Depth 28 and 29:	Female, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter
Depth 30:	Female, C2DE, 36-50 years old, non voter
Depth 31:	Female, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter
Depth 32:	Female, C2DE, 51+ years old, non voter

3. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Recall of both the North East Referendum leaflet and ballot pack was high across the sample. The 'North East Referendum' branding helped to create a link between the two different mailings. However, respondents failed to associate the leaflet with the television advertising, which used the same cartoon style. Failure to link these two elements of the campaign was due to generally low recall of the television advert.

More generally, awareness of the question of whether or not to establish a regional assembly in the North East region achieved a high profile via television coverage and leafleting by the 'yes' and 'no' campaigns. By comparison, there was very little detailed knowledge or understanding of possible local government reorganisation. As a result, many respondents had been surprised by the inclusion of question two on the ballot paper.

The style of the Referendum leaflet was considered simple and appealing. The format, text size and language used also made the information accessible to all. Ideally a shorter leaflet would have been preferred, and the colours were considered rather 'insipid'. Unfortunately, most had failed to engage with the leaflet at a sufficient level of detail, since a majority were still surprised to be asked a second question regarding local government reorganisation. However, when the information was read in the interview situation respondents found it clear, easy to understand and informative.

Future efforts should focus on encouraging voters to read the information provided by the leaflet, since, once read, most respondents considered the information useful and clear. Consider:

- limiting length (as far as possible)
- using short paragraphs of text
- using accessible layout options (e.g. bullet pointed lists)
- employing warmer, more vibrant colours

The profile of information stating the independence of The Electoral Commission could also be heightened, to add to the credibility of the information provided.

The volume of information in the ballot pack proved rather intimidating. A minority found the amount of written material off-putting and decided not to vote. A majority found the task more difficult and time-consuming than they had imagined. Only a minority of the most diligent and determined voters took the time to work through the ballot pack methodically. Most failed to engage with the ballot pack materials fully (particularly the map and explanatory text on the reverse of the map) and simply focussed on the questions.

As a result, and although respondents conceded that the leaflet and ballot pack provided the information needed to make an informed decision, it was clear that voters had not fully understood question two - local government reorganisation. Failure to understand question two was largely a result of respondents failing to link the different elements of the ballot pack i.e. the ballot paper, the maps and the text on the reverse of the maps.

Given respondents' apparent unwillingness to read information and tackle the complexities of the second question, it seems that there may be a limit to what printed materials can achieve. However, future efforts should focus on encouraging voters to read the information provided in the ballot pack, since (similarly to the leaflet), once read, most respondents considered the information useful and clear. Consider:

- limiting the amount of information in the pack (as far as possible)
- (where possible) providing additional information in one place
- increasing the accessibility of the instructions and any other written material (e.g. text on the reverse of maps) via the use of emphasis, bullet points and generally using as little text as possible
- referencing any additional information that needs to be read on the ballot paper itself (i.e. a clear signpost to the maps adjacent to the question itself)
- using plain English wherever possible
- bold labelling of maps (e.g. place names and local authority boundaries)

4. MAIN FINDINGS

At the outset of the interview, respondents were assured that the research was focussing on their views of the North East Referendum materials, rather than their views about the questions asked in the North East Referendum ballot. However, it emerged that respondents were more than happy to discuss their views of the establishment of a regional assembly and local government reorganisation.

4.1 Views about the North East Referendum

Although a majority did not see themselves as particularly ‘politically’ minded (indeed most only voted in General Elections), many had been motivated to vote in the North East Referendum. Motivation to vote in the Referendum had largely been inspired by a strong sense of identity with the North East as a region. Respondents demonstrated an affinity with individual towns and districts, as well as a more general sense of regional pride:

“Everyone I know voted. It was such an important issue for us. We want to look after ourselves round here.” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

Prior to the Referendum, a majority had received large amounts of post from the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns. However, very little of the paper based information received through the post had been read in detail. Respondents had also been aware of considerable media coverage of the Referendum (particularly in the week before the ballot was closed), including debates and news coverage of the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns:

“There was loads of stuff in the post. We had two letters from John Prescott. The first one was wrong so they sent another to tell us the first one was wrong.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

“It was on TV all the time. They had debates and talks about it all.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

It appeared that media coverage and word-of-mouth discussions had strongly influenced decision-making. A minority of motivated respondents admitted that they had tried to influence the votes of their friends and family.

Despite good recall of media coverage surrounding the Referendum, it was noticeable that respondents only recalled coverage of the question about whether to establish a regional assembly. Importantly, there was no recollection of publicity regarding question two (i.e. local government reorganisation). As a result, it was clear that a majority of the sample was unaware that there was a question of local government being reorganised, if a regional assembly was established:

“I didn’t know anything about that at all.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

“I was surprised to see another question on the ballot pack. I didn’t know there was going to be one.” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

A majority of the sample (even non-voters) endorsed the resulting ‘no’ vote. A main concern had been the potential costs incurred in establishing “...another layer of bureaucracy..” Respondents tended to assume that their Council tax rates would increase if a regional assembly was established. More generally, there was also a concern that these costs might ‘spiral out of control’ (a feeling inspired by recent memories of the costs incurred in the building of the Scottish Parliament building):

“That [Scottish Parliament] went up to £400 million or something didn’t it? Who gets to pay for it? We do?” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

“We all know that they were going to put council tax up from the start. They have to pay for it.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

The 'no' vote was also supported by the belief that a regional assembly would lack genuine power. Respondents tended to assume that a North East regional assembly would have very limited powers, with major decisions still being finalised by central Government in Westminster:

"They weren't going to be able to do anything without getting it passed by London anyway. What was the bloody point! Jobs for the bloody boys that's what!" (Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, non voter)

It was only a minority of politically motivated voters in Hexham who had voted 'yes'. This small group believed that a regional assembly would have provided a voice for the North East. Their support was based on the principle that the residents of the North East should have more control over matters affecting their region.

An even smaller minority (once again in Hexham) had voted on the basis of question two (i.e. the question of local government reorganisation). Respondents were divided in their feelings about the issue and had voted both to retain the two-tier system (i.e. a 'no' vote) and to abolish the two-tier system (i.e. a 'yes' vote).

A majority of non-voters had not voted in the referendum because they were openly apathetic, having lost faith or interest in the political process generally:

"Politics is a waste of space now. They are all in it for themselves." (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, non voter)

These were voters who were unlikely to vote in elections other than the General Election. Of these, many had made the decision not to vote in the Referendum prior to the ballot and, as a result, simply discarded their leaflet and ballot pack. Others (a small number of C2DE respondents) had not voted because they had been put-off by the amount of information in the ballot pack.

4.2 The North East Referendum Leaflet

Respondents were pre-placed with the leaflet prior to the interview. However, it emerged that recall of the leaflet was high. A majority claimed that they had received the leaflet about two weeks before their ballot papers.

4.2.1 Initial reactions to the leaflet

The 'North East Referendum' logo on the envelope clearly communicated that the mailing contained official information. A majority recognised that the mailing contained official information. A minority (mainly voters) had expected the envelope to contain their voting papers and were surprised to find it contained information about the North East Referendum:

"I remember getting this through the post. I thought it was going to be the ballot papers at first." (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

The leaflet had stylistic links with the '*don't know doesn't count*' Referendum press, poster, radio and television publicity campaign. The cartoon style, as well as the branding and strap line were common to both the television advertising and leaflets. A majority did not link the leaflet with the television advertising. There was little recall of the strap line '*don't know doesn't count*' and very few were able to link the drawings in the leaflet to the TV campaign.

This lack of recognition largely stemmed from limited and vague recall of The Electoral Commission's North East Referendum advertising campaign. Only a minority, when prompted, remembered a child conversing with his parents. However, several respondents recognised the cartoon style from The Electoral Commission's national '*I don't do politics*' campaign:

“There was that advert with a mum and child. I remember seeing that a couple of times.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

A majority of voters opened the envelope on the day it was received and most put it to one side to read at a more opportune time. A minority opened it more than a week later. Those who had decided not to vote threw the leaflet away as soon as it arrived:

“I opened it when I came home from work. I read all my post then.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

“I didn’t bother. I saw it was the referendum and binned it!” (Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, non voter)

Of those retaining the leaflet, a considerable number of voters had either lost the leaflet or thrown it away by accident by the time the ballot pack arrived. In the interim period most had experienced a deluge of information from the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns and, as a result, there was a tendency for the leaflet to get lost (both physically and in terms of message) amongst this other mail:

“I don’t know what happened to it. My husband and I both had a leaflet but it just got in with everything else and must have found its way into the bin.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

Overall, there were mixed views regarding the optimum time for receiving the leaflet. Some claimed they would prefer to read all the information at once (i.e. leaflet and ballot pack arriving in one envelope). In particular, it was felt that the pictorial step-by-step guide to putting the ballot papers in the right envelopes (i.e. the ‘*what do I need to do?*’ section) would have been a useful when completing the ballot. Equally, others felt that they needed the leaflet information prior to receiving the ballot pack, mainly to provide thinking time but also to give voters time to prepare to vote.

4.2.2 Leaflet design

Although the design of the leaflet was not a key concern for most, a majority appreciated the simple style of the cartoon illustrations. This clear, straightforward approach was felt to facilitate understanding of the serious (and somewhat complicated) information inside since the style was considered appealing and accessible.

The size and format of the leaflet were also considered appropriate and the language and text size were seen as accessible to all – regardless of level of educational attainment. It was only the length of the leaflet that was a concern for some least interested respondents. This group were discouraged by the amount of text in the leaflet, which they felt was off-putting. Ideally, a shorter leaflet was preferred:

*“I only flicked through it. It looked a lot to read and I couldn’t be bothered at the time.”
(Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)*

Some also questioned the colour of the leaflet. The so-called ‘insipid’ brown and grey tones were not found appealing, but were considered tonally appropriate for the serious content of the leaflet. Although a few more astute respondents recognised a need to avoid party political colours, most felt that warmer, more vibrant colours would be more appealing:

“It is just a bit of a sickly colour isn’t it?” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

Overall, the style and layout of the leaflet were successful. Respondents felt that the information was clearly presented and easy to read. For the future there was a preference for a shorter leaflet using warmer, brighter colours.

4.2.3 Leaflet content

Most claimed that they had ‘browsed’ different sections of the leaflet. However, it became clear that, in reality, respondents had not read the leaflet in sufficient detail since many were left with questions that were actually answered within the leaflet. Most notably, many were still surprised and confused by question two.

When prompted, respondents felt that a majority of the leaflet was useful. The ‘*what do I need to do?*’ section was considered a useful visual guide (which many felt should have accompanied the ballot paper). Many reported that putting the right paper in the right envelope had been the most difficult part of completing the ballot for some elderly relatives:

“The little picture layout was good. It was a lot easier than the written instructions that came with the ballot pack.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

‘*What am I deciding?*’ provided an explanation that two questions needed to be answered, which – in retrospect – respondents felt was key information.

“It explains everything you need to know about what is happening and how district councils would be abolished and replaced with something else.” (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, voter)

At the time, respondents had focussed on what they felt were the key questions (discussed in the sections entitled ‘*what is an elected regional assembly and what would it do?*’ and ‘*what would voting ‘yes’ / ‘no’ mean?*’). For many, this was the key information needed from the leaflet. However, those unsure about their decision hoped that this section would provide clearer decision-making information (e.g. a ‘for’ and ‘against’ list):

“I thought it would give the pros and cons of voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’. But it didn’t.” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

Overall, the content of the leaflet was positively received. However, key information was missed – particularly the section pointing out that there would be two questions to answer - suggesting that respondents need to be encouraged to read more of the information provided.

4.2.4 Provenance of the leaflet

Most assumed that the leaflet and ballot pack had been produced by the Government. Very few amongst the sample were aware of The Electoral Commission and none had any knowledge of The Electoral Commission's role in organising elections. A majority assumed that the leaflet had been published by non party political Government bureaucracy.

A minority were aware of the views of the present Government (and particularly John Prescott) regarding regional assemblies and a number therefore felt that (without reading it) the leaflet might be an attempt to encourage the ‘yes’ vote. However, a majority reading the leaflet and instructions viewed it simply as a non-biased “*guide to voting*”.

Unfortunately, the paragraph in the leaflet about The Electoral Commission was typically overlooked which meant that respondents failed to understand that The Electoral Commission is independent from Government. When prompted, all were interested to hear about The Electoral Commission’s independence from Government. This was perceived to increase the credibility of the leaflet in terms of presenting an unbiased view. For the future, increasing the profile of the information about The Electoral Commission is likely to be well received:

“You see I didn’t realise that. I thought it was from the Labour Government trying to get us all to vote ‘yes’ to the assembly.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

4.2.5 Conclusions

The layout of future leaflets need to be simplified even further (perhaps following the staged approach of the ‘*what do I need to do?*’ section) to ensure that essential information (e.g. that there were two questions) is not overlooked.

In addition, many respondents still felt dissatisfied with the level of information provided regarding what a regional assembly might do, if established. Respondents expressed a need for a simple ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ list:

“I still didn’t understand exactly what it would all mean for us here. How would the assembly really affect things like jobs and council tax?” (Female, C2DE, 18-35 years old, voter)

If possible, a shorter leaflet using brighter, warmer colours would heighten the appeal of the information.

Finally, increasing the prominence of information about The Electoral Commission’s independence from Government is likely to heighten the credibility of the information presented.

4.3 The North East Referendum ballot pack

Respondents were pre-placed with the ballot pack prior to the interview. As with the leaflet, the ballot pack was extremely well recalled. There was a high recall of the postal vote earlier in the year and respondents felt the current ballot pack was very similar in appearance.

4.3.1 Initial reactions to the ballot pack

Similarly to the leaflet, respondents noted the clear (and official) statement on the front of the envelope – North East Referendum. Therefore all recognised their ballot pack immediately:

“It says North East Referendum on it. That gives you an idea.” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

The link between the leaflet and ballot pack was clear due to the branding ‘North East Referendum’ in purple on the envelope. The ballot pack was also expected: around half the sample were expecting to receive the pack both as a result of receiving the leaflet and general awareness created by the ‘yes’/’no’ campaigns and associated media coverage:

“I knew it would be arriving fairly soon. The date was getting closer so it had to arrive at some point.” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

Although immediately recognised as official voting papers, many (to a lesser or greater extent) found the ballot pack off-putting. The amount of information contained in the pack was the most immediately unappealing factor:

“I was expecting a simple ballot paper. When I opened it there was loads of stuff. I didn’t read most of it.” (Female, C2DE, 18-35 years old, voter)

Further, when opened, the inclusion of two questions also caused anxiety since many were concerned they did not understand what they were being asked.

As a result, it was only the most determined voters who read the pack and completed their ballot paper immediately. Similarly to the leaflet, a majority placed the ballot pack ‘to one side’ to be dealt with when they had time. However, a minority (of mainly C2DE voters) were overwhelmed by the volume of information provided in the pack and

consequently decided not to vote:

“I just looked at it and thought I don’t understand this at all.” (Female, C2DE, 36-50 years old, non voter)

Overall, it emerged that the amount of information received in the ballot pack strongly influenced perceptions of the complexity of the task. In future, a more ‘slim line’ ballot pack is less likely to alienate less motivated voters.

4.3.2 Use of the ballot pack

Respondents approached the ballot pack in different ways. A small number worked through the information methodically – reading the security statement, instructions and maps before attempting to answer the questions. These (typically, but not exclusively ABC1) respondents tended to be the most motivated voters were most confident about reading and answering questions. This group took the time to engage with the ballot pack:

“When I first got the pack I was a bit overwhelmed but I sat down with everything and went through it and I got a clearer idea about what it wanted.” (Male, C2DE, 18-35 years old, Voter)

“I just sat and read through it all. I knew which way I was going to vote but I wanted all the information that they sent.” (Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, voter)

A majority searched for the key information needed to answer the Referendum questions and therefore focussed on the ballot paper itself which was perceived to be ‘the important bit’. A majority were less likely to read the other information provided, notably the instructions and the text on the reverse of the maps:

“I didn’t really notice them at all. I read the [ballot] paper and filled it in.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

“I just thought it was going to tell you what to do with your ballot paper and you can get that from the envelopes and the leaflet talked about it.” (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, voter)

Only a minority had read the instructions, with the remainder ‘scanning’ the text for any vital information. The failure to read the instructions was because most were discouraged by the volume and density of the text. Even those who had read the instructions agreed that the appearance of the page did not encourage reading.

When respondents were prompted to read the instructions, most did not, in fact, find them difficult to follow. Moreover, the group of ‘diligent’ voters who had read the instructions when voting felt that they had been clear and simple to follow. However, they agreed that the ballot pack instructions lacked the visual impact and simplicity of the step-by-step pictorial instructions in the leaflet.

In future, consider increasing the accessibility of the ballot pack instructions. At present they tended to intimidate due to the length and density of the text. Respondents preferred shorter sections of text, more widely spaced, preferably bullet pointed. Visual instructions were generally well received.

4.3.3 Question one: regional assembly question

Most respondents did not read the information on the beige portion of the question. When voting, a majority focussed on the title (*‘Referendum on an elected regional assembly’*), the question (*‘Should there be an elected assembly for the North East region?’*) and the answers (i.e. the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ options). Only a minority who were diligent and/or politically motivated read the accompanying explanation.

The establishment of a regional assembly in the North East was the question respondents were expecting to be asked. A majority were already confident that they knew what they were being asked to vote about and the answer they were going to give. However, a minority of C2DE respondents remained unclear about the terms ‘referendum’ and ‘elected assembly’. This group were the most likely not to have engaged with the information in the ballot pack and sought quick explanations of these terms from the beige ballot paper.

4.3.4 Link between questions one and two

Most respondents had assumed they would be asked to vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a regional assembly and were surprised to find themselves faced with a second question:

“I thought it would be a case of opening it, saying ‘no I don’t want it’, sticking it in an envelope and posting it back. I didn’t know it would take me about half an hour to work it all out – which it did.” (Female, ABC1, 51+ , Voter)

Having decided to vote and having answered the first question, a majority felt obliged to answer the second question. It was only a minority of C2DE respondents who only answered question one. This group felt that it was not clear that answering ‘no’ at question one still required an answer at question two.

Feedback from voters indicates that at the time of voting, understanding of the second question (regarding local government reorganisation) varied. Firstly there were those who answered both questions knowing there was a link between the establishment of a regional assembly in the North East and local government reorganisation. However, when asked, few were able to explain the link confidently or accurately. Secondly there were those who answered both questions knowing that they were unsure of the link between questions one and two.

4.3.5 Question Two: local government reorganisation

Once again, as with question one, a majority failed to read the explanatory paragraph for question two. Moreover, a majority failed to engage with the maps in sufficient detail. Most only glanced at the visual guide to local government reorganisation and failed to read the text on the reverse.

When pressed, it was clear that all but the most motivated and politically aware respondents remained unclear regarding the creation of single tier authorities and the choices of different geographical options for single tier authorities. As a result, it was clear that many really did not understand what Option A and Option B were proposing.

Examples of confusion that arose included some voters assuming that voting 'yes' meant voting for option A and voting 'no' meant voting option B. Others had assumed that option A was maintaining the status quo and that option B was opting to split current local government structures into two or three:

"I thought that if I voted 'yes' then I should also vote for option A because that is a single Government for the area isn't it? I don't know now I am looking at it again." (Female, ABC1, 51+ years old, voter)

The confusion regarding question two was caused partly by a prior lack of knowledge or understanding about the proposed reorganisation of local government (if a regional assembly was established). Confusion was also due to a failure to read the information provided prior to the ballot or engage with the materials provided in the ballot pack at the time of voting.

Once again those who were more politically aware or diligent felt that the questions and information were clear and easy to follow. Those who were clear how Option A differed from Option B voted on a parochial basis - i.e. *'what's best for my area...'*:

“I wanted more local control for our local area, so I voted for the one with smaller councils.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

“I want more local-ness so I voted option B because it looks more local on the map.” (Female, ABC1, 18-35 years old, voter)

In Northumberland, opinion was divided as to whether one single tier region would either mean less bureaucracy or that the industrial/ traditionally poorer region in the south east of the region would siphon money away from the needs of (rural) Northumbria. In County Durham respondents commonly saw the benefit of Option B because the map clearly showed that individual single tiers would deal with a smaller (and therefore easier to manage) area.

4.3.6 Use of maps

Only the most diligent and determined voters took the time to manipulate the various different parts of the ballot pack i.e. to understand how the maps related to the questions and to read the information provided on the reverse of the maps. This group typically found the information on the back of the maps very useful in answering the second question regarding local government reorganisation:

“I thought it simply and clearly laid out what the options were and where the boundaries would be. No problems for me at all.” (Male, C2DE, 36-50 years old, voter)

However, a majority only glanced at the maps and did not read the text on the reverse. Most simply lacked the motivation to engage with all the different elements of the ballot pack and simply wanted to vote as quickly as possible. Many felt the ballot pack provided too much to read overall.

There was a particular reluctance to read the text on the back of the maps. Once again, this information was perceived to be too text heavy which proved off-putting. Some

C2DE respondents also disliked the official tone of the information, for example phrases such as *'would exercise the function of'*. However, when prompted to read the information most understood it and felt it adequately explained their voting options.

4.3.7 Conclusions

Failure to understand question two was largely a result of respondents failing to link the different elements of the ballot pack i.e. the ballot paper, the maps and the text on the reverse of the maps.

For the future, firstly, consider encouraging voters to use the maps provided by signposting the availability of maps on the ballot paper adjacent to the questions.

Secondly, respondents needed to be encouraged to read the text on the reverse of the maps since this was considered the key information that voters needed to understand when answering question two. For the future, consider using less text, more bullet points and the use of emphasis. For example, *'If an elected regional assembly is established for the North East region...'* is the crux of the link between questions one and two.

Finally, the maps themselves required some clarification. Firstly, respondents needed to be clearly reminded that the maps were representing single tier areas. Secondly, the labelling of major towns would assist understanding for those unsure about the geography of the region.

4.4 Security

There was a high recall of the postal vote earlier in the year and respondents felt this ballot pack was very similar. A majority had noted the security bar code, but most had not thought about its role. In reality, concerns about security were only raised when prompted.

However, when prompted, a minority suspected that the use of a barcode meant that the ballot paper was traceable to individuals (which some felt was off-putting). One respondent was suspicious enough not to vote because of the barcode and signature required:

*“That was the final straw. I am not letting them get more information on what I think.”
(Male, ABC1, 36-50 years old, non voter)*

Several voters noted the lack of a witness statement within this pack. These respondents, and others when prompted, felt this change had made the voting process more straightforward:

“That was a pain last time. Also I thought, ‘how would they know who the witness was anyway?’” (Male, C2DE, 51+ years old, voter)

A majority therefore preferred not needing to find some one to witness their signature.

4.5 Additional Assistance

A majority of respondents were aware that their ballot paper could be handed in at local collection points (assumed to be council offices). Only one ‘last-minute’ voter had used the delivery point since she was determined to vote but too late to vote by post.

There was little awareness of assistance being available at assistance and delivery points. Respondents did not feel that they themselves would ever seek assistance when completing a postal ballot, but felt that such assistance might support elderly voters. Many mentioned older family members struggling with assembling their postal ballot (i.e. putting the right papers in the right envelopes) where relatives had been forced to offer help.

Only a minority of respondents in Hexham recalled seeing OS maps in the library, but none had taken the time to look at the map. Since maps were provided in the ballot pack, few felt that they would be interested in looking at a larger scale map.