

Testing Referendum Questions

Research Study Conducted by Ipsos MORI for
The Electoral Commission

The
Electoral
Commission

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Introduction

Background and objectives

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body set up by Parliament. Its aim is integrity and public confidence in the democratic process.

Under the Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA), the Commission is required to comment on the intelligibility of referendum questions for UK-wide, national and regional referendums. Under the Local Government Act 2000, the Commission must also be consulted on the intelligibility of questions used in local referendums on changing the executive arrangements of local authorities.

In August 2008, the government consulted the Commission on the intelligibility of four draft questions for use in referendums on the executive arrangements of local authorities. The Commission commissioned Ipsos MORI to test the government's four draft questions, as well as their alternative suggestion for the question wordings. The questions were concerned with voters' desires to move their local authority from its existing executive arrangements to other arrangements; examples of executive arrangements include a leader elected by councillors, a mayor elected by voters or a committee structure.

Both the government questions (version A) and The Electoral Commission's alternative questions (version B) are included in the appendices in the format they were tested. Below are the question wordings themselves:

	Government suggested wording	Electoral Commission suggested wording
To a mayor and cabinet executive from any governance arrangement involving a leader	<p><i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is currently led by a councillor who has been elected leader by the council; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a mayor who will be elected by the voters of <i>[insert area name]</i>?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>	<p>Currently <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The <i>[leader/councillors]</i> chooses a group of councillors to form a 'cabinet' to help the leader run the council.</p> <p>This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.</p> <p>The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a mayor elected by the people who live in <i>[insert area name]</i> to lead the council and the local community. The mayor would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.</p> <p>Do you think the way <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run should change?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>

	Government suggested wording	Electoral Commission suggested wording
To a mayor and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements	<p><i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is currently led by a mayor who has been elected by the voters of <i>[insert area name]</i>; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a councillor who will be elected leader by the council?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>	<p>Currently <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run by a <i>[a committee/committees]</i> made up of councillors</p> <p>This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.</p> <p>The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a mayor elected by the people who live in <i>[insert area name]</i> to lead the council and the local community. The mayor would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.</p> <p>Do you think the way <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run should change?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>
To a leader and cabinet executive from any governance arrangements involving a	<p><i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is currently led by a mayor who has been elected by the voters of <i>[insert area name]</i>; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a councillor who will be elected leader by the council?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>	<p>Currently <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run by a mayor elected by the people who live in <i>[insert area name]</i> to lead the council and the local community. The mayor chooses a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.</p> <p>This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.</p> <p>The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The leader would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.</p> <p>Do you think the way <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run should change?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>
To a leader and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements	<p><i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is currently led by one or more committees of councillors; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a councillor who will be elected leader by the council?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>	<p>Currently <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run by a <i>[a committee/committees]</i> made up of councillors</p> <p>This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.</p> <p>The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The leader would choose a group of councillors to form a 'cabinet' to help them run the council.</p> <p>Do you think the way <i>[insert name of local authority]</i> is run should change?</p> <p>Yes, it should change No, it should stay the same</p>

Methodology

The research comprised two 90-minute discussion groups with the general public, along with twenty in-depth cognitively focussed interviews.

Given the wide-ranging nature of the subject matter it was thought that this approach would be most suited to this study. It was important to include both discussion groups and in-depth interviews for the following reasons:

- Discussion groups are a generative process, which means that they enabled us to check whether the referendum questions addressed the issues *generally* in a way that made sense to people.
- In addition, given the dynamic nature of groups, people often find it easier to make recommendations in a group environment than in a one-to-one (where they may feel as though they are 'criticising' the interviewer if they criticise the questions, despite our expertise in avoiding this type of effect).
- Furthermore, people are often unwilling to admit a lack of knowledge about certain issues, and in a group situation (where it is likely to become clear that few have any knowledge about this issue), socialising effects mean that people may feel more willing to be honest about their ignorance.
- Of course, for some people the reverse may be true, and they may be more willing to admit to ignorance only in a one-to-one situation, which is why the in-depth interviews were also essential.
- Depth interviews are extremely useful as they enable skilled interviewers to build up a much higher level of rapport with participants than is feasible during a group discussion. This allows for the participant to be more open, and for more in-depth questioning to examine fine details.

Conducting both groups and depths was essential so that all of the above elements could be captured within the scope of the research. By utilising these two qualitative methodologies, we were able to include both the depth and breadth required in order to fully understand individuals' responses to these questions.

It is important to keep in mind that qualitative research is an interactive process; it not only identifies what people think, but also investigates why they hold these views. As such, qualitative research is not intended to be statistically representative of the wider population from which the sample audience is selected; rather, it aims to elicit a wide range of views. Furthermore, discussion groups and depth interviews allow us to test reactions to new ideas in a way that quantitative studies would not allow.

A discussion guide was used to direct the group and in-depth discussions. This was produced in consultation with The Electoral Commission and is appended to this report.

It was decided that both the groups and in-depth interviews would be conducted with a mixture of rural and urban respondents from county councils, district councils with a mayor, and a unitary council with a lord Mayor. The groups were held in **Bedford** and **Stoke on Trent**, while depth interviews were conducted with residents of these areas as well as **Cambridgeshire** and **Staffordshire**.

Included within our sample were respondents with low literacy and those without academic qualifications, as well as four who did not speak English as a first language. This was done in order to assess and include the views of those who may have more difficulty reading and writing generally; we needed to understand their perception and grasp of the questions and the wording that was used. We recruited a range of different ages and social classes in all areas. It should also be noted that throughout this report we have included our comments and input as experts in questionnaire design.

Presentation and interpretation of the data

It is important to note that **qualitative** research is designed to be *illustrative* rather than *statistically representative* and therefore provides insight into why people hold views, rather than conclusions from a statistically valid sample. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with people's perceptions, rather than facts.

Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from participants. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the group as a whole, although in each case the verbatim is broadly representative of, at least, the comments from a small number of participants.

Publication of data

Our standard Terms and Conditions apply to this, as to all studies we carry out. Compliance with the MRS Code of Conduct and our clearing is necessary of any copy or data for publication, web-siting or press releases which contain any data derived from Ipsos MORI research. This is to protect your reputation and integrity as much as our own. We recognise that it is in no-one's best interests to have findings published which could be misinterpreted, or could appear to be inaccurately, or misleadingly, presented.

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Key Findings

There are mixed views about just how much information is needed, and how much information is too much. Some participants believe it is important to have some information about each choice in order to give the voter the best chance to make an informed decision. However, many others feel that the ballot paper should contain simply the bare minimum and that the participants will inform themselves about the issues prior to voting. They therefore favour a shorter question.

I think most people would go for the simpler option I think

Male, depth interview, Bedford

The second one [version B]¹ is better because it explains more.

Female, group discussion, Stoke

I think no information is ignorance. A lot of information is knowledge or confusion

Male, group discussion, Stoke

The discussion over how much information is required highlighted confusion about **the purpose of the question**. This is crucial, as the purpose directly affects participants' preferences and ideas on what they think necessary in the question. If the purpose of the question is solely to ascertain the electorate's preferences, then the shorter and more direct question is better.

This approach was compared favourably to the situation in General Elections, where voters simply state their candidate of choice and are not provided with manifestoes (or other information) for each candidate.

However, if the purpose of the referendum question is to inform voters about the options and then ask a question, then the longer, more information-heavy version B is preferred. Regardless of the version, it was agreed that all questions could be improved.

Female: I'd hope we've all read this and thought about it before we actually turned up on the day to put our Xs on the paper

Female: But some people don't

Group discussion, Bedford

¹ Version A is the government's suggested wording. Version B is The Electoral Commission's suggested wording

A key theme from most participants is a desire for **clarity**. Particularly in version B, participants were not always sure what they were being asked. Participants felt confused about whether they were being asked about *change generally* or about the *types of governance specifically*. It was felt that the wording of the question in version B, 'Do you think the way Stoke City Council is run should change?' was not clear and that it was not immediately obvious that a vote for change would mean a change to the option listed above. Indeed, some felt they were being asked two different questions:

- Do you want the current system to change?
- What do you want it to change to?

I don't know what it's asking me to vote on here, should we, are we saying that should change or that should stay the same? I don't know, I'm confused, totally, I wouldn't know how to answer that [question B3]

Female, depth interview, Stoke

You might want it to change but you might not want this specific alternative and this is the way that most referendums are skewed, in my humble opinion

Male, depth interview Bedford

If someone says yes, I think it should change, they'll tick that box and then suddenly, well, it doesn't say to what. It's only specifying that one particular change

Male, depth interview, Bedford

The extent of the confusion in version B was evident when a few **participants gave different answers for version A and B of the same question**, without realising it. Those who gave different answers tended to be those with low literacy levels or those who speak English as a second language. Once it was pointed out to these participants that they gave a different answer to the same question they re-read version B and changed the answer on this question, and not version A.

The confusion seems to have arisen because of the amount of information and the question wording; the latter was not seen to 'flow' easily for the participants, causing misunderstandings.

There's too much information which you shouldn't be put in. Like this, 'the leader will choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help him.' I don't think that is necessary to answer the question.

Female, depth interview, Stoke

Participants felt it would be clearest if the box in which they were supposed to place an X, or preferably a tick, was next to the **option** they were voting for. This not only avoided and confusion about which choice they were voting for, but it made it seem like they were positively placing a mark next to their preference.

I just think you'd better off having ticks by them ... a tick by that one or a tick by that one...by the option itself, I would say would be a lot easier for people.

Female, depth interview, Stoke

1. The Big picture

‘Macro’ issues around referenda and the wording of questions

As mentioned in the introduction, both the in-depth interviews and group discussions included sections on overall views of local government. This occurred at the start of the groups, to ‘warm them up’ to the topic and group situations; it occurred at the end of the in-depth interviews, which began with the questions to elicit top-of-mind responses. This section looks at the wider issues around attitudes to local governance generally and how these ‘macro’ issues affect referendum question wording. It is crucial to understand these wider views, both because they are useful as stand-alone data, but also because it is essential to compare these opinions to the responses given to the draft questions. Checking whether views match question responses is a ‘double check’ on question clarity and comprehensibility.

Overall views of local government

The two discussion groups began with lively debates about local government. Participants were very willing to talk openly about their feelings on their local council and were for the most part very cynical towards both national and local governance.

Participants felt particularly aggrieved that they believe they do not have enough of a say in the running of their local area. They felt that their opinions were easily ignored and never listened to.

I think many times they need to listen a lot more.

Male, group discussion, Stoke

It was for this reason that in both groups, participants felt that it was important to get across to voters the idea that a referendum is their chance to directly affect the running of their local council. In Stoke, the suggestion was to make explicit the idea that individuals would have a say in choosing the mayor, for example:

- “...the council will in future be led by a mayor who will be elected by **you** the voters”

In Bedford, participants preferred to address the issue of linking voting with individual voters, by inserting “**I**” into the option sentence, for example:

- “I would like a directly elected mayor”

Participants felt that the process needed to be more personal because they thought that people – themselves included – were frustrated with local government. Some of the participants attending the discussion groups had written letters to the council or had some sort of dealing (about litter, young people in the street, noise etc.) with their local council; this was true of both ABC1s and C2DEs. This level of local activity seemingly had a detrimental effect on the participants, who felt that despite all their efforts they were not being listened to. In Stoke, participants felt that the only time any action was ever taken was in the run-up to local elections. Participants also felt that council members,

particularly the mayor, are **overpaid** for the work they do, and questioned the need for so many highly paid advisers. They expressed a wish for **greater transparency** to see where their money is being spent.

I see the county wasting a lot of money.

Female, group discussion, Bedford

There's too many chiefs and not enough Indians

Male, group discussion, Stoke

Attitudes towards governance and its structure

There was mixed understanding of the **structure of local government**. Many participants were not clear about the mayor's role in local government and did not see him as a leader of the "local community" as stated in question B2. There was also a good deal of confusion about what the 'council' and 'councillors' are, and potential differences between them.

Participants from the social grades ABC1 on the whole had a better understanding of the **different types of local government** and the various responsibilities and services provided by local councils than those in social groups C2DE. It was also the ABC1s who were more likely to realise and acknowledge that they used the local services.

On the whole, the C2DEs and those with lower education said that they did not use any **local council services**. However, when asked whether they recycled, or used services such as housing and education, participants acknowledged they did, thus realising that they do use local services, if unknowingly.

Despite a lack of understanding of the roles of each, many participants expressed a general preference for elected mayors over leaders chosen by councillors. Indeed, the desire for elected officials went further than just a mayor; participants expressed support for as many 'directly elected' roles as possible. Participants were positive about the phrase "**directly elected**" being included in the question and felt it should be made more clear who is actually choosing the leaders/mayors. By having a greater say in who is elected, the participants felt they would have a greater role in the running of their local area. For some this was especially important because they currently feel ignored by their council. The group in Stoke even suggested shortening the mayoral term to two years, so that the electorate could express approval or disapproval with the way their area was being run on a more frequent basis.

Accordingly, there was **no real support for the idea of a leader chosen by councillors**. A leader chosen by councillors was seen as 'insular' and politicised, further excluding the public. Participants felt that favours may be exchanged for votes, or party political choices made, rather than having the best person elected as leader. Participants also felt that this system was just another way of ignoring the will of the electorate.

Well, if the councillors pick a councillor then we're out of the running totally. At least at the moment we've got a bit of a say. If that's taken away from us then, God, it can only get worse

Female, group discussion, Stoke

It is important to consider that in **Bedford** it is likely that a particular preference for a mayor rather than a leader was expressed because the incumbent and relatively popular mayor is an **independent**. However, participants feared that if a leader was to be elected by the councillors the mayor would lose their independence and be drawn into party politics. The participants were suspicious of this happening, particularly as they thought that their mayor is not well-liked by the Council. Some thought that the questions were devised so that people would vote to give the councillors more power.

Well, to me that's how they would word it [the referendum] if they wanted to get rid of an independent candidate.

Male, depth interview, Bedford

Generally, older participants had voted in local elections and referendums in the past, however, most younger people had not. There was mixed knowledge of what a **referendum** is; although most knew but perhaps could not express it very clearly, those in lower social grades and low literacy participants particularly struggled with the term 'referendum'.

General comments on the questions

As mentioned previously, the response **options were confusing** for some participants. It was felt that the **"yes/no"** options are not always clear and relevant to the question.

"No I think it would be much better if you said that these two were, it should change and it should not, it should stay the same. It's more clear and direct."

Female, depth interview, Stoke

Many participants preferred the options to be presented in a way where the **tick box** is next to, or below, each method of governance, rather than after both options. They felt that this would add clarity and confidence for people, so that they could be sure they are choosing the option they support, and have not been confused by the layout or question.

This question I agree with, but then I don't understand what do you want me to agree on?

Female, depth interview, Stoke

Ipsos MORI's experience in designing postal, or self-completion questionnaires means that we agree with this assessment. In designing self-completion questionnaires (which are similar to ballots in that they are completed by an individual with no help from an interviewer), we generally seek to put the tick boxes (or similar) near to the relevant choice for the sake of clarity.

The "yes/no" options were also perceived by some to be **leading**. It was felt that "yes" is overtly positive and therefore suggesting to the voter that it is a better option. It was also felt that some **bias** is attached to having "yes" 'because people are more likely to say 'yes' no matter what is being asked'. The "no" option was

seen by some as having negative connotations and therefore a ‘bad’ option to vote for.

*In anything like this the predisposition is for people to tick
yes*

Male, group discussion, Bedford

People think change is good and like to vote yes to be positive

Male, depth interview, Cambridge

Ipsos MORI’s experience in questionnaire design also reflects this finding; we avoid using yes/no response options where possible on attitudinal or preference measures, on the reasoning that it oversimplifies the response options and may be confusing.

The **amount of information** provided was also seen to be a possible source of bias. Most participants agreed that the more information provided in the question, the more biased the question is. This is because it is extremely difficult to present information in a way that is completely neutral. Therefore the more information that is given, the harder it is to keep it neutral. Participants agreed that if any information is provided about the two options, the two sides must be exactly ‘even’. As such, Ipsos MORI would suggest that the wording of the question be as **symmetrical** as is possible.

In addition, participants suggested that **too much information** was off-putting for the voter. Many felt that version B has too much information and that young people especially will not be interested in reading it. Participants of all ages found version B too long, a few even saying that if they received it in the post they would **‘throw it in the bin’** without reading it.

*A young person wouldn’t want to read that [version B].
They’d get bored. So would all of us*

Female, group discussion, Stoke

[There is] too much information to take in [question B1]

Male, depth interview, Cambridge

Structurally, **most preferred short sentences** rather than long, complex ones. This has much to do with attention span and clarity. Although shorter sentences may not be grammatically perfect, participants said they appreciate sentences and paragraphs that are to the point, clear and short, separating out all individual points. One participant even suggested that the question needed a **glossary** (there is more detail on specific words later in the report).

*I still prefer the shorter one, shorter questions with short
sentences.*

Female, depth interview, Stoke

One former primary school teacher pointed out that there are issues with subjunctive and subordinate clauses, but this was not picked up on by other participants.

I think it assumes a lot of understanding of the language. I think there's a lot of people that aren't necessarily either literate or speakers of English as a first language that find these sort of subordinate clauses very difficult.

Female, group discussion, Bedford

There was also general concern about **font size**. Participants were concerned that some people will struggle to read anything too small, and the lengthy wording of some of the questions caused some anxiety about 'fitting it all on the ballot papers.' Concern was also raised about **layout**, with some participants wanting to see the two options side by side rather than one below the other, in order to impart, or enhance, neutrality.

Participants of the group held in Stoke suggested that the questions were given to the Plain English Society to ensure the simplest possible wording of the questions.

Give it to the Plain English Society... and they'll put it into the cleanest words that wouldn't need all this gobbledygook about councillors and arrangements and things. They will sort it out into about two sentences and it would make plain sense for 99.99% of the population.

Male, group discussion, Stoke

2. Detailed findings

'Micro' issues around the referendum questions - wording and phrases

This section contains findings from the more detailed and in-depth review of the questions themselves. In both the groups and in-depth interviews we encouraged participants to 'pick apart' the questions and raise any issues they had with words, phrases, language, tone or other aspects of the questions themselves.

This was set about via a purist cognitive approach in the in-depth interviews, where participants were simply given the questions, following a short introduction, and asked to respond to them and comment on them as above (see guide in appendix for specific prompts and probes used). This approach was loosely designed to mimic the situation voters will encounter in a voting booth, where they see the question for the first time when they open their ballot paper.

In the group discussions, participants were shown the questions following an in-depth discussion about local government and structure. These responses were somewhat more in-depth and contextual as a result.

Specific findings

A few participants believed the word '**mayor**' is more positive and 'official' sounding than the word '**leader**'. Participants felt that 'mayor' has positive connotations, sounding 'grand' and 'official' while 'leader' was not seen to be on the same scale as 'mayor'.

The word 'leader' I think is misleading because that is something attributable to the head of a political party rather than a mayor, who may or may not be affiliated to a political party.

Male, depth interview, Bedford

A widely raised issue concerns the statement in version B "**This referendum is about changing the way the council is run**". It was felt that the *change* mentioned was either compulsory or implied that it was needed. Participants also felt that having this statement and having the question and options relating to this statement (i.e. mentioning change) lent a bias to the change option. The positive connotations surrounding change also implied that change is needed. A neutral alternative was suggested:

This referendum is about the way the council is run.

Female, group discussion, Bedford

Many participants thought this line is unnecessary altogether. They felt it takes up more space and adds more to read, without adding value to the question. Some suggested that a shorter statement could act as a **title** at the top of the ballot paper.

In addition, participants felt that the question should be along the lines of **“should it change or not?”** rather than just “should it change?” This was suggested as a way of making the question more **neutral**, and better presenting both sides. Adding ‘or not’ effectively ‘allows’ potential voters to answer “no” without making it sound like the negative or bad option. Participants felt that, as the statement tells them the referendum is about ‘change’ fundamentally, having the word ‘change’ in the response options implies that the “yes it should change” option is the ‘right answer’. For the most part participants agreed that having “yes” and “no” in the response options is confusing and they should be removed.

It maybe implies that change is necessary, doesn't it?

Male, depth interview, Bedford

If you said, ‘do you think the way the local authority is run should stay the same?’ you would actually get a different result. If you ran those two you’d get a different result

Female, group discussion, Bedford

The term **‘arrangement’** was seen to have several negative implications for participants. Some felt that it sounds like a **temporary** structure, lacking any grandeur or officialdom. Others felt that an ‘arrangement’ sounds like a ‘cozy’, ‘chummy’ pact formed by perceived untrustworthy politicians to ensure their own self interests are protected. A further, different, negative connotation of the word ‘arrangement’ was that some participants felt an arrangement is a strong agreement which it would be wrong to break or undo.

It’s unusual for them to use that particular word [arrangement]. They’re usually more precise... It could be anything, an arrangement, and it implies cosiness

Male, depth interview, Bedford

Change this arrangement implies a change will happen. It [arrangement] sounds temporary

Female, depth interview, Bedford

I wouldn’t even bother to put ‘arrangement’

Male, group discussion, Stoke

As the last of the above verbatims implies, most felt that the word ‘arrangement’ is unnecessary and can simply be deleted. A common criticism of the questions was the frequent use of the words **“council”** and **“councillor”**. This led to some confusion, and some participants lost interest when reading the questions, particularly both versions of question 4. It was felt that the frequent use of these terms alienates and confuses voters, even leading voters to give an answer they do not mean to. Participants felt it is this kind of wording that leads to apathy amongst voters because they feel that councillors simply “like the sound of their

titles.” They suggested alternative terms: council members, members of council or local authority.

I think what we’re doing by making it complicated and using technical language, we’re making it not accessible to people who may have difficulty reading or comprehending what this is actually all about.

Male, group discussion, Stoke

Within the space of 14 words you’ve got the councillors, councillors, councillors, councillors. So you’ve got four councillors”

Male, group discussion, Stoke

The phrase **‘in future’** was also seen as unnecessary by many participants. It was felt that it makes the sentences cumbersome where “is” or “for” would be more appropriate.

Take the ‘in future’ out, because it’s obvious it’s not going to be now

Male, group discussion, Stoke

In versions B1, B2 and B3 (alternate versions to government wording) participants felt that the term **‘people’** should be replaced by ‘voters’ or ‘the electorate’. C2DE participants particularly agreed that it may not be clear to everyone, particularly young people, that it is they who would be casting a vote. It was argued that by having ‘voters’ instead of ‘people’, it becomes clear that the decision is in the hands of those who have turned out.

Instead of putting ‘people’, you put ‘the voter’ there. Some people might say, ‘the people, what people?’

Male, group discussion, Stoke

In order to maintain neutrality it was suggested that the word **‘elected’** be inserted when discussing **councillors**. Some participants felt that by emphasising the fact that the mayor is directly elected it adds bias to that option because it automatically seems more democratic. Therefore, it was important to point out that the councillors are also elected.

“I would actually add the word ‘elected’ ... ‘made up of elected councillors’, so that you aren’t losing that, sight of that fact that the councillors are actually elected. So that you’re not actually giving the bias to the mayor over councillors”

Male, depth interview, Bedford

Participants also said that they did not like the use of the word **‘them’** in the third line of the B versions. This was seen as ambiguous and not essential to the sentence.

*I still have that query about 'to help them run the council',
which who is 'them?' It doesn't specify*

Male, depth interview, Bedford

The word **'proposal'** was seen in a negative light by some participants who believed the word sound pompous. In addition, it was also argued by some participants that the word 'proposal' adds an 'air of inevitability' to the proposition, making it sound as if an official decision has been made which simply needs rubber stamping. They also wanted clarification over who has made the proposal.

Most participants felt that there is no need for the word **'currently'** in any of the statements, as it is clear simply by saying "Stoke is run..." that this is the way the system is *currently* run.

*Why does that word currently need to be there? You don't
need that word currently in. That is then stating a fact
that people know.*

Male, group discussion, Stoke

Concerns were raised about the first line of questions B4 and B2, as some participants felt that the question is **biased** towards a mayor/leader because very **little information is given** about the committee of councillors, while the position of the mayor is clearly set out. Some participants felt that the information depicts the mayor as a "hero" who can get things done while the committee of councillors is left as an ambiguous arrangement.

*I think that people choose to have one person that leads
their whole area, as one person on top of the whole thing so
they know who is responsible for everything. I would choose
the first option... the other option sounds like that, a lot of
bits.*

Male, group discussion, Bedford

*There's much more information about the mayor than these
councillors. The mayor sounds like a hero*

Male, depth interview, Bedford

3. Academic overview and practical recommendations

An academic overview

Many of the suggestions offered by participants are in fact in-line with the good practice recommended by academic experts in questionnaire design.

According to Fowler Jr. and Cosenza, in Chapter 8 of the *International Handbook of Survey Methodology* (de Leeuw, Hox, Dillman eds.), in order to elicit an answer that is a valid measure of a particular construct, respondents must (among other things) “be able to fit what they have to say into the form in which they are required to answer; and be willing to provide what they deem to be the most literally accurate answer they can²”.

For example, the point raised about voters choosing ‘yes’ more often than ‘no’ simply because it seems like the more desirable answer is not just an assumption made by our participants; there is a great deal of evidence for the phenomenon in academic literature.

The above-mentioned authors state that “when questions are put in the form of a statement, it has been shown that some respondents are more likely to agree than disagree. Those who are less educated, have less knowledge of the topic or are less interested are particularly likely to show this pattern. Acquiescence thus becomes another source of error variance, something that affects answers that has nothing to do with the true answer to the question³”. This is of particular concern given the fact that so few voters will have a great deal of knowledge about the issue, and the fact that the subject is not necessarily one of high interest to most members of the public. Of course, it is worth considering that those with higher interest and knowledge levels are more likely to be the ones who show up on voting day.

Furthermore, participants’ point about the tick boxes being next to the response options is also an issue that has ties to questionnaire design methodology. As pointed out in *Survey Methodology* (Groves, Fowler Jr, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer and Tourangeau), one of the most well-known books on survey design, a key recommendation for self-completion questionnaires is to “present information

² Chapter 8: Writing Effective Questions, Fowler Jr., Floyd J and Cosenza, Carol, University of Massachusetts. Quoted in the *International Handbook of Survey Methodology*, de Leeuw, Edith D.; Hox, Joop J.; and Dillman, Don A., eds. An EAM (European Association of Methodology) book, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2008).

³ The authors define ‘acquiescence’ as “the tendency for respondents to agree or say ‘yes’ (rather than disagree or say ‘no’) to questions that are put in the form of statements”. Italics authors’ own.

that needs to be used together in the same location”⁴. Their analysis of self-completion questions also reflect this project’s finding that the questions (and responses) need to be simple and have a single focus, avoiding a ‘double-barrelled’ question which appears to ask about more than one issue simultaneously. The authors state that “asking multiple questions at once can impose a heavy interpretive burden on the respondents, who may be unable to keep the full set of logical requirements in mind... Whatever savings in space this achieves is likely to be offset by losses in understanding”⁵. As such, keeping the questions simple and straightforward is crucial not only because participants prefer it, but also because it will ensure they are better able to understand the question.

Although some academics recommend randomisation on ballots as a potential tool for avoiding any bias, this may well be an impractical suggestion for a referendum such as the one under consideration here; however, it is important to keep in mind that the order in which response options occur can have an impact on the way people respond to questions. As such, utilising mitigating techniques such as putting tick boxes immediately next to response options becomes even more important.

Overview of Recommendations

Ipsos MORI have a very strong reputation for high-quality questionnaire design. We have developed in-house systems to ensure that draft surveys are always scrutinised internally so that they can hold up to external scrutiny. We make great efforts to ensure that our questions cannot be perceived as biased, or trying to lead participants to a particular response.

As such, our expertise in practical application of the academic guidance on questionnaire design is unparalleled. Our team here have spent a great deal of time considering the best approach(es) to these referendum questions.

We recommend that there be as much symmetry as possible between the two responses to remove any possibility of bias or emphasis. Phrases or words which are superfluous such as ‘arrangement’ or ‘directly elected’ should be removed and only a core level of information should be retained within the questions themselves. This serves both to keep language and phrases simple, as well as preventing any confusion or bias that these details may create.

The questions should focus on the governmental preference of participants, rather than their preference for change itself, though it can certainly be pointed out that each option will either necessitate a change or retain the status quo.

We also agree with participants’ suggestion that the tick boxes be next to each response option, rather than at the end. This will serve to keep the questions and responses as clear and straightforward as possible.

⁴ Chapter 7.7.4: Self-Administered Questions. *Survey Methodology* (Groves, Robert M.; Fowler, Jr., Floyd J.; Couper, Mick P.; Lepkowski, James M.; Singer, Eleanor; and Tourangeau, Roger. Wiley-Interscience (2004).

⁵ *ibid*

Perhaps the key learning is that there is a very delicate balance between the provision of too much information and not enough. However, most participants advocated the provision of information, but not within the question itself. Some suggested that the ballot paper actually be contained within a leaflet containing separate, neutral information about the referendum.

Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that people who are politically engaged will be the only ones going to polling stations; there are many who will go simply for the novelty of it, or to exercise their democratic right. Therefore, information should be as easily available as possible, without letting it convolute the ballot slip itself.

Appendices

Government wording

A1.

To a mayor and cabinet executive from any governance arrangement involving a leader

[*insert name of local authority*] is currently led by a councillor who has been elected leader by the council; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a mayor who will be elected by the voters of [*insert area name*]?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

A2.

To a mayor and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements

[*insert name of local authority*] is currently led by one or more committees of councillors; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a mayor who will be elected by the voters of [*insert area name*]?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

A3.

To a leader and cabinet executive from any governance arrangements involving a directly elected mayor

[insert name of local authority] is currently led by a mayor who has been elected by the voters of [insert area name]; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a councillor who will be elected leader by the council?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

A4.

To a leader and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements

[insert name of local authority] is currently led by one or more committees of councillors; do you want to change this arrangement so that the council will in future be led by a councillor who will be elected leader by the council?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

Electoral Commission wording

B1.

To a mayor and cabinet executive from any governance arrangement involving a leader

Currently *[insert name of local authority]* is run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The *[leader/councillors]* chooses a group of councillors to form a 'cabinet' to help the leader run the council.

This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.

The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a mayor elected by the people who live in *[insert area name]* to lead the council and the local community. The mayor would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.

Do you think the way *[insert name of local authority]* is run should change?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

B2.

To a mayor and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements

Currently *[insert name of local authority]* is run by a *[a committee/committees]* made up of councillors

This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.

The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a mayor elected by the people who live in *[insert area name]* to lead the council and the local community. The mayor would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.

Do you think the way *[insert name of local authority]* is run should change?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

B3.

To a leader and cabinet executive from any governance arrangements involving a directly elected mayor

Currently *[insert name of local authority]* is run by a mayor elected by the people who live in *[insert area name]* to lead the council and the local community. The mayor chooses a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.

This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.

The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The leader would choose a group of councillors to form a cabinet to help them run the council.

Do you think the way *[insert name of local authority]* is run should change?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

B4.

To a leader and cabinet executive from alternative arrangements

Currently *[insert name of local authority]* is run by a *[a committee/committees]* made up of councillors

This referendum is about changing the way the council is run.

The proposal is that in future the council would be run by a leader who is a councillor chosen by the other councillors. The leader would choose a group of councillors to form a 'cabinet' to help them run the council.

Do you think the way *[insert name of local authority]* is run should change?

Yes, it should change

No, it should stay the same

Discussion guides

Referendum Questions User Testing

TOPIC GUIDE for Depth Interviews

Final 15.08.08

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Explore the question options themselves, in terms of concepts, ideas, terminology, language and tone. Unpick the questions themselves, and compare draft versions, assessing specific pros and cons of each.
- Check whether the issues addressed in a way people understand: do they understand the concept of a 'referendum'? The local governmental issues at hand?;
- Explore attitudes to the referendum questions and issues at hand – what are their overall views and opinions on local government structure (both at baseline levels and with stimulus materials / new information)?
- Understand the context of the referendum issues: how and how much do people understand about these topics?

Section	Topics to be covered	Length (approximates)
INTRODUCTION	<p>Introduce self and thank respondent</p> <p>Explain confidentiality of all responses</p> <p>Explain reason for tape recorder</p> <p>Explain that there are no right or wrong responses and stress that we didn't write the questions, so they can say anything they like without hurting our feelings.</p>	5 minutes
ASSESS QUESTIONS – REVERSE ORDER BETWEEN RESPONDENTS (SOMETIMES VERSION A IS FIRST, SOMETIMES B IS FIRST)	<p>I'd like to show you a question which might be used in a referendum in your area. GIVE VERSION A OR B (ROTATE)</p> <p>Please take a moment to answer the question PAUSE</p> <p>What is it asking you? Can you repeat the question in your own words?</p> <p>How did you go about answering the question?</p> <p>Did you read through the question fully before looking down at the answers and picking one?</p> <p>Was it easy or difficult to answer?. Why is this?</p> <p>How easy is the question to understand? Why?</p> <p>How sure are you that the answer you gave reflects your opinion?</p>	15 minutes

	<p>What would make you more certain?</p> <p>Is there anything you would need to ask or clarify before answering the question to the best of your ability?</p> <p>ROTATE DEPENDING ON VERSION USED What do you think about having the words ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ in the answers? What if it said “Yes – it should change” or “No – it should stay the same” in the answer? [PROVIDE EXAMPLE] Does this make things clearer or more confusing?</p> <p>How well does the question flow?</p> <p>What do you understand by the word ‘x’? What does it mean to you in this context? PROBE WITH ANY TECHNICAL TERMS, E.G. REFERENDUM, MAYOR, ETC</p> <p>Are there any words or phrases that aren’t clear? Which ones? What would be better?</p> <p>Are there any words that you aren’t familiar with? Which words might be confusing to people? Why do you think this?</p> <p>What might make this question difficult to answer for other people? Thinking about your friends and family, would any of them have difficulty with the question?</p> <p>How balanced is it? Are there any words or phrases that make one option sound better than the other?</p> <p>Does it give you enough detail, too much or the right amount? What extra information does it need? What information could be left out?</p> <p>Is it a subject that you have given much thought to? How does this inform your answer?</p> <p>NOTE SUGGESTED CHANGES; DO NOT PROBE</p>	
<p>ASSESS QUESTIONS – REVERSE ORDER BETWEEN RESPONDENTS (SOMETIMES VERSION A IS FIRST, SOMETIMES B IS FIRST)</p>	<p>SHOW VERSION A OR B (ROTATE)</p> <p>NOTE IF THEY REALISE IS THE SAME QUESTION. PROMPT IF THEY DO NOT REALISE AFTER FIRST FEW MINUTES OF DISCUSSION</p> <p>REPEAT SAME PROMPTS AS ABOVE</p> <p>There are different proposed versions of both of these questions. Which of these do you think is better? Why?</p> <p>NOTE SUGGESTED CHANGES BUT DO NOT PROBE</p> <p>Possible observation-based prompts</p> <p><i>You spent more time reading this version of the question. What was going through your mind?</i></p> <p><i>You hesitated with this version of the question. Why was that?</i></p> <p><i>You decided on a response very quickly. Why was that?</i></p> <p><i>Why do you think there are answers missing? Which third option would you</i></p>	<p>10-15 minutes</p>

	<p><i>add to make it easier for you to answer?</i></p> <p><i>What is it that makes you prefer this question – PROBE FOR LENGTH, WORDING etc. PROBE FOR WHAT DIFFERENCE IT MAKES SEEING THE OTHER QUESTION FIRST</i></p>	
OTHER PAIRS OF QUESTIONS	REPEAT EXERCISE FOR OTHER PAIRS OF QUESTIONS	25-30 minutes
GENERAL ATTITUDES TO LOCAL AREA, LOCAL SERVICES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO “WARM DOWN”	<p>Now thinking more generally:</p> <p>These questions relate to local government.</p> <p>What do you know about your local council? Where do you get your information from?</p> <p>What services do you use? Do you vote in local elections? Why is this?</p> <p>Do you know who runs your local council?</p> <p>PROBE FOR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT STRUCTURE</p> <p>How involved do you feel in how your area is run? Do you think it affects your daily life?</p> <p>FOR UNITARIES/METROPOLITAN BOROUGHES:</p> <p>If you live in <area> then council services are all provided by <council name>. By council services we mean things like social services, education, environmental health, housing, street cleaning and so on.</p> <p>FOR COUNTY/DISTRICTS</p> <p>If you live in <area> then the county council provides most services and your district council provides fewer services.</p> <p>The county council provides services like education, social services and trading standards.</p> <p>The district council provides services like housing and environmental health.</p>	5-10 minutes
REFERENDUM ISSUES	<p>Your council can be set up in a couple of different ways.</p> <p>One system is “Leader and Cabinet”. The “Leader” is a councillor and is elected by the other councillors.</p> <p>S/he then selects councillors to form a cabinet who are responsible for different council services. The cabinet can just be councillors of a single political party or can be from a mixture of parties.</p> <p>Another system is “Mayor and Cabinet”. Instead of a “Leader” elected by the councillors, there is a Mayor, who is chosen by the electorate. Otherwise the system is similar to having a “Leader”.</p> <p>Do you know which system your council has?</p> <p>If there are plans to change from one system to another, people</p>	5-10 minutes

	<p>in the local area have to be consulted about which system they want. This is done in a referendum.</p> <p>What does the word 'referendum' mean to you?</p> <p>This isn't necessarily something that will happen in your area. We are just asking you to help us develop the questions that would be used if there was a referendum.</p>	
CLOSE	<p>Any questions?</p> <p>Handout incentive, reiterate confidentiality</p> <p>THANK AND CLOSE</p>	5 minutes

Referendum Questions User Testing
TOPIC GUIDE for Focus Groups on 19 August 2008
 FINAL 15.08.08

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Assess the overall levels of knowledge of local governance and structure;
- Assess interest in the subject area – both at a baseline level and also when prompted / reminded about the roles and responsibilities of local government, and the effect it has on individuals' daily lives;
- Explore attitudes to the referendum questions and issues at hand – what are their overall views and opinions on government structure (both at baseline levels and with stimulus materials / new information)?;
- Check whether the issues addressed in a way people understand: do they understand the concept of a 'referendum'? The local governmental issues at hand?;
- Understand the context of the referendum issues: how and how much do people understand about these topics?; and
- Explore the question options themselves, in terms of concepts, ideas, terminology, language and tone. Unpick the questions themselves, and compare draft versions, assessing specific pros and cons of each.

Section	Topics to be covered	Length
INTRODUCTION	<p>Introduce self and thank participants for attending</p> <p>Explain purpose of focus group and confidentiality of all responses</p> <p>Explain reason for tape recorder and presence of clients if necessary.</p> <p>Explain that there are no right or wrong responses and we are interested in everyone's opinion</p> <p>Housekeeping: toilets and fire exits</p> <p>Introductions: Ask each person for their name, how long they have lived in the area and their favourite thing about living in the area</p>	5 minutes
ASSESS GENERAL ATTITUDES TO LOCAL AREA, LOCAL SERVICES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	<p>What do you know about your local authority? Where do you get your information from?</p> <p>What services do you use? How do you rate these/ why is this?</p> <p>Do you vote in local elections? Why is this?</p>	5 minutes

<p>ASSESS KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVT</p>	<p>Do you know who runs your local council? Do you know how it works? PROBE FOR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT STRUCTURE</p> <p>How involved do you feel in local governance? Do you think it affects your daily life? How often do you think about it?</p> <p>How much do you feel you can influence decision-making in your local area? Why do you say this?</p> <p>What do you think the roles and responsibilities are of your local authority? What do they do? PROBE</p> <p><u>PROMPT:</u></p> <p>FOR UNITARIES/METROPOLITAN BOROUGHES:</p> <p>If you live in <area> then council services are all provided by <council name>. By council services we mean things like social services, education, environmental health, housing, street cleaning and so on.</p> <p>FOR COUNTY/DISTRICTS</p> <p>If you live in <area> then the county council provides most services and your district council provides fewer services.</p> <p>The county council provides services like education, social services and trading standards.</p> <p>The district council provides services like housing and environmental health.</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
<p>INTRODUCE REFERENDUM ISSUES</p>	<p>Your council can be set up in a couple of different ways.</p> <p>One system is “Leader and Cabinet”. The “Leader” is a councillor and is elected by the other councillors.</p> <p>S/he then selects councillors to form a cabinet who are responsible for different council services. The cabinet can just be councillors of a single political party or can be from a mixture of parties.</p> <p>Another system is “Mayor and Cabinet”. Instead of a “Leader” elected by the councillors, there is a Mayor, who is chosen by the electorate, or people. Otherwise the system is similar to having a “Leader”</p> <p>Which of these systems do you think would be better? Why/in what ways? Which system do you think your council has?</p> <p>When I say the word ‘referendum’, what do you think of? PROBE.</p> <p>What do you know about referendums? Do you know how and why they are used?</p> <p>A referendum is when the electorate approves or rejects measures or changes selected by a legislative body.</p> <p>What sorts of issues there have been referendums on in the UK?</p>	<p>15 minutes</p>

<p>ASSESS QUESTIONS – STARTING WITH THE SITUATION RELEVANT TO THE SPECIFIC AREA</p>	<p>If there are plans to change from one system to another, people in the local area may be consulted about which system they want. This is done in a referendum.</p> <p>This isn't necessarily something that will happen in your area. We are just asking you to help us develop the questions that would be used if there was a referendum.</p> <p>I'd like to show you the question that could be used in a referendum to switch from <system 1> to <system 2></p> <p>SHOW VERSION A (GOVT WORDING) FOR W. MIDS, SHOW VERSION B (EC WORDING) FOR SOUTHEAST</p> <p>What do you think of this question? PROBE FOR TOP-OF-MIND RESPONSES / VIEWS</p> <p>How easy is the question to understand? Why?</p> <p>What is it asking you? ASK PARTICIPANTS TO REPHRASE THE QUESTION IN THEIR OWN WORDS?</p> <p>Are there any words or phrases that aren't clear? Which ones? What would be better?</p> <p>How balanced is it? Are there any words or phrases that make one option sound better than the other?</p> <p>Are there any words that you aren't familiar with? Which words might be confusing to people? Why do you think this?</p> <p>WRITE UP ANY SUGGESTED CHANGES ON FLIP CHART</p> <p>Does it give you enough detail, too much or the right amount? What extra information does it need? What information could be left out?</p> <p>READ OUT. USE FLIPCHART TO ILLUSTRATE.</p>	<p>15 minutes</p>
<p>ASSESS QUESTIONS ALTERNATE VERSION</p>	<p>SHOW VERSION B (GOVT WORDING) FOR W. MIDS, SHOW VERSION A (EC WORDING) FOR SOUTHEAST</p> <p>NOTE IF THEY REALISE IS THE SAME QUESTION. PROMPT IF THEY DO NOT REALISE AFTER FIRST FEW MINUTES OF DISCUSSION</p> <p>REPEAT SAME QUESTIONS FOR VERSION B AND NOTE SUGGESTED CHANGES ON FLIP CHART</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
<p>COMPARE QUESTIONS</p>	<p>COMPARE THE EDITED VERSION OF A AND B.</p> <p>Ok, we've reviewed both of these. Now, which of these do you think is better. Why?</p> <p>How can they be improved?</p> <p>Think about your own parents or grandparent: which version would they understand better? Why is that?</p> <p>Now think about young people who may be voting for the first</p>	<p>5 minutes</p>

	<p>time. Which version do you think they would understand better? Why?</p> <p>Do you think the questions can be understood by everyone? Who might have a problem understanding the questions?</p>	
OTHER PAIRS OF QUESTIONS	REPEAT AS ABOVE FOR OTHER PAIRS OF QUESTIONS	20 minutes
CLOSE	<p>Any questions?</p> <p>THANK AND CLOSE</p>	5 minutes