Swindon May 2018 voter identification pilot evaluation

Summary of key findings

The voter identification pilot scheme in Swindon required voters to produce to produce their poll card in order to meet the requirement to vote. The poll card contained a QR code which was scanned in the polling station. If a voter did not bring their poll card they could show photo ID (from a specified list) or have their identity 'attested' by another elector (with ID) registered at the same polling station.

Our evaluation of the scheme found that:

- **The majority of voters were able to meet the identification requirements upon arriving at the polling station**. However, some electors did not have the required ID available when they came to vote on 3 May. The majority later returned and were able to cast a vote.
- **There is no evidence that the ID requirement deterred electors from voting.** In our public opinion surveys no non-voter told us that ID was the reason they had not voted. Also, turnout at the 2018 polls was higher than the comparable elections in 2016. It is possible that some electors were deterred from voting, believing correctly or incorrectly that they did not have ID, but this seems unlikely to apply to significant numbers.
- **We cannot draw firm conclusions about whether the ID requirement had a disproportionate impact on particular groups of people, for example those with a learning or physical disability.** While we have seen no evidence that specific groups struggled with the ID requirement it is challenging to gather evidence in this area as relatively small groups of people could have been affected in different ways.
- **The delivery of this pilot was manageable for the Returning Officer and their staff and, aside from the IT element, there is nothing in their experience of the pilot to suggest that Swindon would face significant issues with the administration of a similar ID requirement in the future.** While the IT worked well on 3 May the development and set up was a significant demand on time and resource.
- **Public attitudes to electoral fraud did not significantly change from before to after the pilot**. The same proportion of people said they think electoral fraud is a problem in Swindon in May 2018 as did so in January 2018.

Our findings suggest that the 2018 local elections in Swindon were not significantly affected by the voter ID pilot in either its impact on voters or on the administration of the poll. However, it is important to be cautious when drawing conclusions from this pilot about the impact of any wider application of voter ID.

Background

1.1   At the May 2018 elections five local authorities tested the impact of requiring voters at polling stations to show a form of identification before being issued with a ballot paper.

1.2   Each area defined their own list of acceptable ID for the pilot, in consultation with the Cabinet Office. The full list of ID accepted in Swindon is set out in Appendix A. Each pilot required a Pilot Order which legally allowed the changes to be tested at the May 2018 local elections. These orders also include details of amendments to existing processes. All the orders can be found on gov.uk.

Evaluation criteria

1.3   The Electoral Commission is required to evaluate any pilots carried out under Section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000. The Commission's evaluation must consider several criteria set out in the legislation. They are whether:

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

1.4   In addition, the UK Government set two objectives for these pilots:

- That proposed 'ID at polling stations' policy measures are proportional to the policy objective of reducing the opportunity for electoral fraud.
- That the proposed 'ID at polling stations' policy measures enhance public confidence in the security of the electoral system.

1.5   Our assessment below is structured in order to consider all the aspects of both the statutory criteria and the Government's objectives.

Our research

1.6   We have collected information from different places to help us answer these questions:

- Public opinion surveys asking people about the elections and what they thought of the pilot.

- A survey of people who worked in the polling station.[1]
- Data about what identification people showed when they voted, and the number of people who were turned away because they didn't have the right identification.
- Feedback from Returning Officers and their staff
- Feedback from organisations that represent different groups of voters.
- Feedback from observers on polling day.

1.7   View the full datasets from our research

Evaluation findings

1.8   This report sets out our detailed findings for Swindon. We have produced a similar report for each of the other individual pilot areas. We have also published an overarching report setting out our assessment of the pilots as a whole.

1.9   The voter identification pilot scheme in Swindon required voters to produce to produce their poll card in order to meet the requirement to vote. The poll card contained a QR code which was scanned in the polling station. If a voter did not bring their poll card they could show one of a passport, photo card driving license, Northern Ireland Electoral Identity Card, Biometric Immigration Document or EEA Identity Card. Another elector registered at the same polling station (with one of the required ID types) could also attest to the identity of an elector who was unable to show ID (each elector could attest on behalf of up to two other electors).

Impact on voters

Headline findings

1.10 Data provided by Swindon, and set out in table below, from all polling stations shows that the majority of voters were able to meet the identification requirements upon arriving at the polling station. However, some electors did not have the required ID available when they came to vote on 3 May. The majority of these electors later returned and were able to cast a vote.

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[1] The survey used in this study was developed from the 2015 Poll Worker study conducted by Alistair Clark and Toby James. Their input in adjusting it for the 2018 local elections was gratefully received. Clark A. & James T. (2017) Poll Workers in Pippa Norris et al (eds) Election Watchdogs, Oxford University Press.

Table 1.1

Electorate	Electors initially unable to vote (no ID)	Electors initially unable to vote (wrong ID)	Electors not returning with correct ID	No. not returning as % of polling station votes cast
158,000	56	8	25	0.06%

1.11 The types of ID presented also suggest that the majority of voters were able to meet the requirement with little difficulty. Unsurprisingly the most common ID shown was the poll card with 95% of voters using this type of identification. The next most used form of ID was a photo driver's licence which was used by 4% of voters.

1.12 This data can only tell us about the impact on some of those electors attempting to vote at a polling station. It does not include electors who may have gone to the polling station and decided not to attempt to vote when they became aware of the ID requirement (from posters, etc. at the polling station). It also does not include any electors who did not go to a polling station at all on 3 May because they felt (correctly or incorrectly) that they would not be able to provide the required ID. However, there is other available evidence which suggests that electors were not significantly affected in this way.

1.13 In our public opinion research conducted immediately following 3 May we asked respondents if they voted on 3 May or not. Those respondents that said they were non-voters were asked why they did not vote. This question was asked unprompted, i.e. respondents did not pick a reason from an existing list.

1.14 The reasons given by non-voters were largely in line with those we usually see in response to this question. For example, 32% of non-voters in Swindon said they did not have time, were too busy or had work commitments. Sixteen percent said that they didn't know who to vote for, didn't have enough information, or don't understand enough about politics. No respondents in our survey in Swindon said that the ID requirement was the reason they had not voted.[2]

1.15 Evidence from our public opinion research suggests that the public awareness activities run by Swindon in the months before 3 May did effectively contribute to the relatively low numbers of electors initially failing to present any or the correct ID. For example, in Swindon the proportion of the public who said they had heard something about the ID requirement rose from

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[2] In our survey in Swindon, 57% of respondents said they voted on 3 May, with 39% saying they did not. This is similar to the figure for all areas piloting ID requirements, of 67% voters to 32% non-voters. We know that claimed turnout in surveys is usually higher than official turnout figures partly due to over-claim and partly because surveys may be more likely to pick up responses from voters. Note that findings relating to non-voters are on a small base size.

17% in our research conducted in January 2018 to 39% in the surveying carried out from 4 May. In our post-election survey, we also asked polling station voters in particular if they were aware they had to take ID to vote – 80% of polling station voters in Swindon said they were aware.

1.16 Respondents in Swindon were most likely to have heard about the ID requirement via some form of local press (TV, radio, newspaper) with four in ten (43%) citing that as a source of information. The next most commonly cited source of information (34%) was various council communication, eg inserts with council tax bill etc.

Turnout

1.17 If the requirement to show ID had deterred many electors from attempting to vote on 3 May we would also expect to see a drop in overall voter turnout at the 2018 local government elections in Swindon. In fact, the turnout in 2018 was higher, at 39%, than the 34% recorded at the last comparable elections (the local government elections in 2016).

Table 1.2

Ward	2016 turnout	2018 turnout	Change
Blunsdon and Highworth	40%	44%	4%
Central	39%	46%	7%
Chiseldon and Lawn	N/A	44%	N/A
Covingham and Dorcan	38%	46%	8%
Eastcott	40%	45%	5%
Gorse Hill and Pinehurst	35%	35%	0%
Haydon Wick	32%	41%	9%
Liden, Eldene and Park South	33%	37%	4%
Lydiard and Freshbrook	37%	42%	5%
Mannington and Western	31%	35%	4%
Old Town	38%	45%	7%
Penhill and Upper Stratton	30%	31%	1%
Priory Vale	26%	32%	6%
Rodbourne Cheney	30%	34%	4%
Shaw	32%	42%	10%
St Andrews	29%	29%	0%
St Margaret and South Marston	32%	44%	12%
Walcot and Park North	32%	36%	4%
Wroughton and Wichelstowe	38%	45%	7%

1.18 We cannot be certain that the ID requirement did not affect overall turnout – beyond those electors who were refused a ballot paper. For example, Swindon's public awareness campaign, put in place to support the pilot, meant that electors saw substantially more advertising about the election than they usually would for a local government poll. In one scenario this activity could have encouraged some electors who do not normally vote while deterring others who usually do (because they felt they did not have sufficient ID). However this is unlikely and the results from our public opinion research suggest that this is not what happened.

1.19 We have also considered whether variation in turnout at ward level suggests any disproportionate impact on certain electors, for example by age or other demographic factors. As the table below shows there was variation across different wards in both 2016 and 2018. However, it is common to see notable differences between wards in different years even at comparable polls.

1.20 Our analysis did not find any clear indication of linking changes in turnout to demographic differences across electoral wards. We found no pattern in relation to age, economic activity, ethnicity or tenure.

Accessibility and ease of use

1.21 The evidence above suggests that the majority of voters found the ID requirement easy to comply with. We asked people in Swindon if they needed to provide identification at future elections, how easy they would find it to access it. The vast majority (91%) said it would be easy.

1.22 We have seen no evidence that specific groups, for example those with a learning disability or visual impairment, struggled with the ID requirement in Swindon. However, it is challenging to gather evidence in this area as relatively small groups of people could have been affected in different ways. We also know that many organisations representing those with learning disabilities and/or visual impairments have raised general concerns about the ID requirement.

1.23 We cannot therefore draw any firm conclusions about whether the ID requirement had a disproportionate impact on these particular groups.

Postal voting

1.24 We looked at levels of postal voting in Swindon to assess whether the ID requirement had pushed voters towards postal voting. In 2018 18.6% of the electorate were issued with a postal vote for the May elections. This is down from the recent peak at the EU referendum where 20.4% had a postal vote and is relatively small increase on the last Swindon local elections in 2016 when 18.1% were postal voters. This data does not suggest any notable move towards postal voting instead of polling station voting.

Impact on administration

Staffing and training

1.25 The Returning Officer decided not to deploy additional staff in polling stations on 3 May although they did double (from 10 to 20) the number of polling station inspectors to provide extra support across the area. They also increased the fees paid to polling staff to reflect the additional responsibility (from the usual local government election fee to the usual Parliamentary election fee).

1.26 In their feedback after polling day the Returning Officer and the electoral services team at Swindon have indicated that the level of staffing used was sufficient to deliver a good service to voters on polling day. They felt that with the process for scanning poll cards working well, as it was, it would have been possible to manage with fewer staff. However, they were also clear that even without the IT element the pilot could have been delivered with the level of staffing they used on 3 May.

1.27 Polling station staff in Swindon received the normal training session and then an additional one hour session delivered by the software supplier. The Returning Officer and their staff have said that they would not necessarily see the need for that level of training if the pilot was run again.

1.28 The results from our survey of polling station staff suggest that the training was effective with 43% of polling station staff in Swindon rating the quality of their training experience as excellent and a further 51% as good. In terms of the instructions they received the vast majority agreed that the instructions received on the what types of identification were acceptable were clear (93%) and instructions received on requesting and verifying voter identification were clear (93%). Also, 93% agreed that the instructions they received on how to use the IT equipment were clear.

1.29 We also asked staff if they agreed or disagreed that the training had prepared them well for polling day and 92% agreed that it had.

1.30 Our survey asked staff to tell us what they thought would improve their training experience. The improvement that was most often mentioned was further practical training such as a roleplay exercise replicating the interaction between staff and a voter asked to provide identification.

1.31 The additional costs on staffing and training related to the ten extra polling station inspectors, the increased fees and the additional IT training.

Local certificate of identity

1.32 Swindon did not issue a separate local form of identification because the poll card was their main accepted ID. A poll card should be delivered to all electors (Swindon hand delivered theirs) and so, unlike the ID requirement in

some of the other pilot areas, no electors should be unable to meet the requirement. However, in order to address the possibility of lost poll cards Swindon did issue replacements, on demand, up to and including polling day. In total they issued 66 replacement poll cards.

1.33 The Returning Officer told us that this was a manageable process although the need to include the QR code on any re-issued cards did complicate the process. They felt that there would be scope to refine this process if it was to be repeated.

1.34 Swindon, uniquely among the five 2018 pilots, also used a system of attestation on polling day. This meant that another elector registered at the same polling station (with one of the required ID types) could vouch for the identity of an elector who was unable to show ID (each elector could attest on behalf of up to two other electors). On 3 May 107 voters were issued with ballot papers as a result of the attestation process.

1.35 The Returning Officer told us that the fact the attestation process had a written element (the attestor needed to sign a form) made it more time consuming for staff on the day. However, it did provide a further option to avoid denying an elector a ballot paper.

Polling day

1.36 Overall, feedback from polling station staff indicates that delivering the ID requirement at this pilot did not present significant challenges. About half of those who had worked at a previous election in Swindon said that they felt this election easier than in previous years (48%) and 38% felt it was about the same as in previous years; however, 10% felt that it was more difficult.

1.37 Four in five (80%) polling station staff said that they had no problems at all in checking voters' identity. When asked whether they agreed that asking voters to prove their identity had little or no impact on their work at polling day about 84% agreed and 9% disagreed with this statement.

1.38 Polling station staff were also asked how confident they were that the requirement to ask voters to verify their identity could easily be replicated at another election. Around three-quarters (73%) of the staff surveyed in Swindon were very confident that this requirement could easily be replicated, 25% were somewhat confident and 1% were not very confident.

IT

1.39 The IT used in polling stations on 3 May worked well. There were very few problems reported by staff and this agrees with our observations in Swindon on polling day. The Returning Officer told us that, as a result of the IT system, the additional information available throughout polling day was useful, for example on levels of turnout at individual polling stations. This would be an even more helpful facility for electoral staff at higher turnout polls where it could be used to allocate resources as needed on polling day.

1.40 However, the Returning Officer was also clear that the time and resource required to put the IT in place for 3 May was significant. This required input from staff at Swindon and extensive time from the software supplier in order to ensure the IT had the necessary functionality and level of security needed for the effective running of the poll.

1.41 It would not be realistic to expect the software supplier to be able to devote a similar level of resources to this if other areas (ie their other customers) were also using the systems and required support. This potentially undermines the scalability of this approach. Although, this would need to be offset against the lessons learned from the 2018 pilot and, potentially therefore, the time that could be saved if the exercise was repeated.

1.42 In terms of cost, while some of the costs incurred in the pilot related to development work which may not need to be repeated there would still be ongoing costs which local authorities would need to meet in order to use these systems. These include software licensing, hardware (tablets/scanners) and additional staff training.

Impact on security

1.43 We cannot judge the impact of the pilot on the security of the May 2018 elections in Swindon. This is one of the key limitations of any evaluation of these pilots – we cannot say if the requirement to present ID at polling stations prevented any fraud that would have occurred if the pilot had not taken place. We do know that no cases of electoral fraud in Swindon have been reported to the police following the May 2018 polls.

Impact on public confidence

1.44 We have used our public opinion survey results to explore whether the pilot in Swindon had an impact on public confidence in the security of the election. It is important to remember that even where we see changes in the survey results before and after the pilot we cannot be certain those changes were the result of the pilot.

1.45 We asked respondents to our public opinion survey whether a requirement for voters to show identification at the polling station would make them more or less confident in the security of the voting system, or if it would make no difference. In Swindon 27% said they would be more confident (of which 14% said they would be a lot more confident) and 1% said it would make them less confident. The majority of respondents (68%) said it would make no difference.

1.46 We also asked how safe or unsafe respondents considered voting in a polling station. In both survey waves (in January and May 2018) the percentages saying they think it is safe are high (85% and 82%) but there is no statistically significant difference between the two points. However, there is

an increase in the proportion of respondents saying they think it is very safe between January and May (from 44% to 54%).
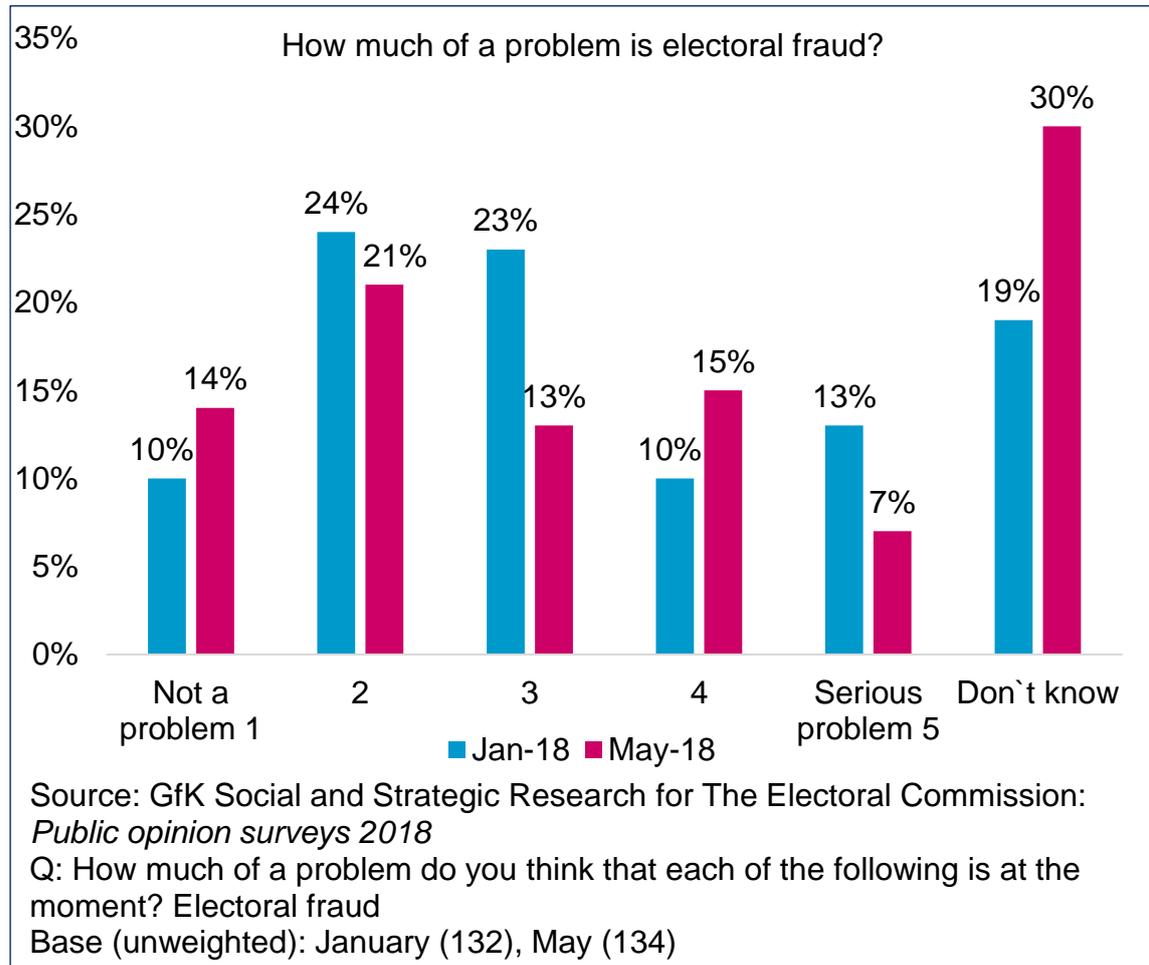
Figure 1.1 In general, when it comes to being safe from fraud or abuse, how safe or unsafe do you think these things are?[3]

Source: GfK Social and Strategic Research for The Electoral Commission: *Public opinion surveys 2018*
Q: In general, when it comes to being safe from fraud or abuse, how safe or unsafe do you think these things are? Voting at a polling station
Base (unweighted): January (132), May (134)
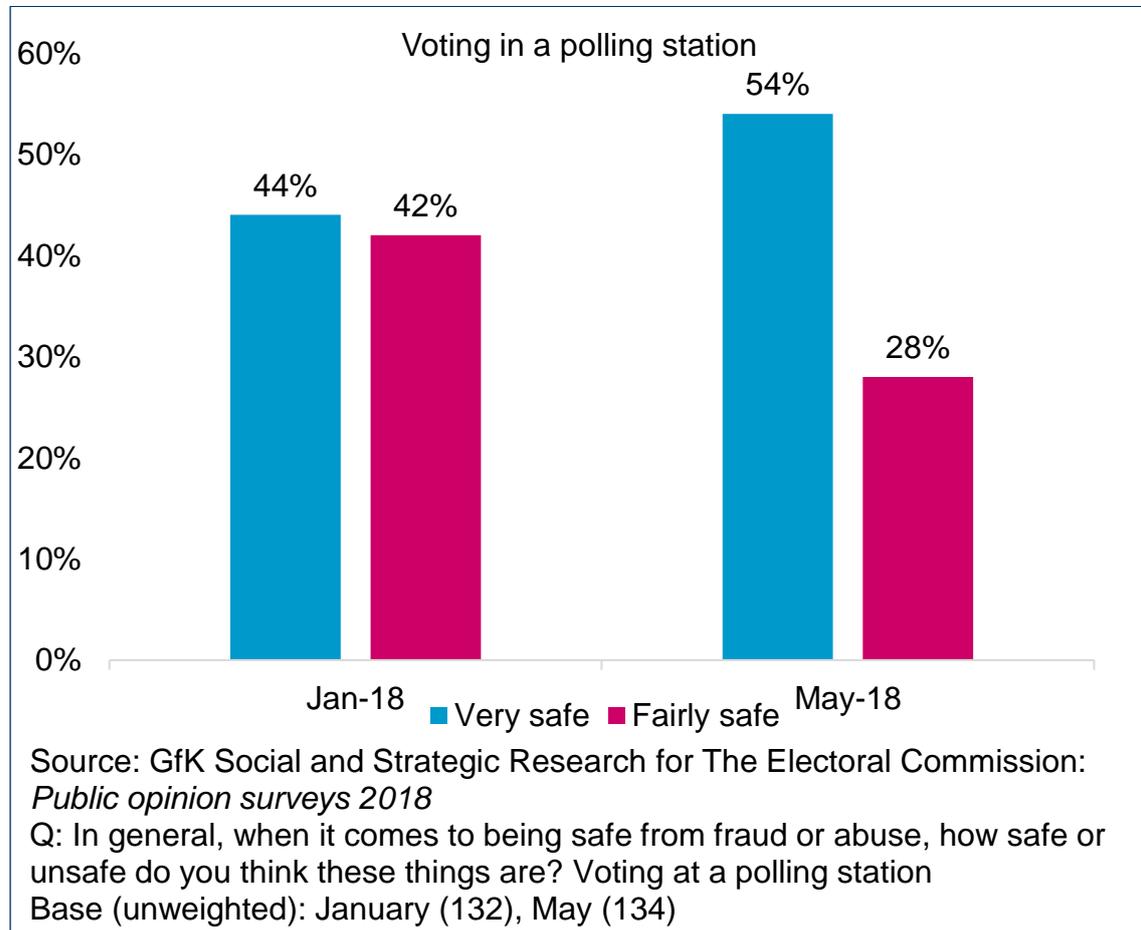
1.47 Respondents in both January and May were also asked how much of a problem they thought electoral fraud is at the moment. The chart below demonstrates little change in attitudes with the proportion of respondents saying they believe electoral fraud to be a problem (those rating it 4 or 5) being 23% in January and 22% in May. For this question, the lack of change in the results for Swindon is in line with what we see in other areas holding elections (but not pilots) in May 2018.

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[3] Due to rounding of data, there may be small variations (c.1% point) between reported aggregated totals and the sum of disaggregated figures.

Figure 1.2 How much of a problem do you think that electoral fraud is at the moment?

How much of a problem is electoral fraud?

Source: GfK Social and Strategic Research for The Electoral Commission: *Public opinion surveys 2018*
Q: How much of a problem do you think that each of the following is at the moment? Electoral fraud
Base (unweighted): January (132), May (134)

1.48 The survey results show little change in attitudes between early 2018 and the immediate post-election period. Respondents' likelihood of considering fraud a problem in May 2018 was the same as in January and there was no change in their overall assessment of the safety of voting in polling stations. Although they were more likely to believe voting in a polling station is very safe from fraud (rising 10% points in that period). We should be cautious about drawing any wider conclusions about the impact of voter ID requirements on public confidence as these findings relate to a single local authority area.

Appendix A

People in Swindon could take their poll card so that they could vote in person at the polling station. If a voter could not bring their poll card then could use one of the following forms of identification:

- a passport issued by the United Kingdom, a Commonwealth country or a member state of the European Union
- a photocard driving licence (including a provisional licence) issued in the United Kingdom or by a Crown Dependency, or by a member State of the European Union
- an electoral identity card issued under section 13C (electoral identity card: Northern Ireland) of the Representation of the People Act 1983
- a biometric immigration document issued in the United Kingdom in accordance with regulations made under section 5 of the UK Borders Act 2007
- an identity card issued in the European Economic Area

If a voter did not have any of these forms of identification they can also be attested. Another elector registered at the same polling station (with one of the required ID types) could also attest to the identity of an elector who was unable to show ID (each elector could attest on behalf of up to two other electors).