Executive   1st November 2002

Report of the Head of Civic, Democratic and Legal Services

Electoral Pilot Schemes

Purpose of Report

1. To bring to Members attention the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the electoral pilots schemes which were held in the May 2000 and 2002 elections.

Background

2. Following the 1997 General Election a Government working party was set up to review electoral arrangements. In October 1999 it recommended that pilot schemes of innovative electoral procedures should be run, to include**:**

- Polling days; moving polling day to an alternative weekday or a day at the weekend or allowing voting over more than one day;
- Early Voting; opening a limited number of polling stations in the period before polling day at accessible locations to allow any eligible elector to vote;
- Mobile polling; providing a mobile polling station which could take the ballot box to groups of voters, for example, by visiting residential homes;
- All postal ballots; allowing an election on the basis of postal voting only;
- Electronic Voting; supplementing polling booths and polling stations with automated voting equipment, telephone voting or on line remote voting via the internet.

3. The Representation of the People Act 2000 set out the detailed procedural requirements whereby local authorities could propose and secure approval for pilot schemes. It also required councils to report on and evaluate the pilots.

4. In May 2000 32 Councils ran a total of 38 experimental voting arrangements in the local government elections. A brief evaluation of each type of pilot scheme and a sample of user authorities follows:

5.**Early Voting**

Blackburn with Darwen: Saturday prior to election day
Total of 1466 people voted – 1.47% of the electorate.

Chester City Council: Polling Station in Town Hall Square from the Tuesday – Friday prior to polling day.
Total of 1200 people voted – 1.8% of the electorate

Coventry City Council: One city centre polling station from Wednesday to Saturday prior to polling day.
Total of 3402 people voted – 1.5% of the electorate

Reditch BC: Polling station in the Town Hall from Tuesday to Friday prior to polling day
Total of 762 people voted – 1.56% of the total electorate

In the early voting schemes an average of 1.58% of the electorate used the facility and there was in general a small and insignificant increase in turnout.

6. **All Postal**

Bolton MBC All Postal 3 wards
2000 Average turnout – 39.31%
1999 Average turnout – 24.77%

Doncaster MBC All Postal 1 ward
2000 Average turnout – 45%
1999 Average turnout – 24%

Gateshead MBC All Postal 2 wards
2000 Average turnout – 54%
1999 Average turnout – 24.5%

Norwich City All Postal 2 wards
2000 Average turnout – 31.4%
1999 Average turnout – 19.5%

These four all postal ballot schemes produced an average turnout of 42.42% compared to 23.19% in 1999

7. **Mobile Polling Stations**

Norwich City Council had a mobile polling station visit residential homes for the elderly on the Tuesday and Wednesday prior to polling. 91 electors cast their vote in this way which meant that every applicant for this service cast their vote.

Sunderland City Council visited 35 residential establishments on the Wednesday and Thursday prior to polling day. A total of 1177 people were entitled to vote at the mobile polling stations and 652 chose to do so.

8. **Extension of Polling Hours**

Leeds City Council extended the hours of polling to accord with those applicable to Parliamentary and European Parliamentary elections. Overall turnout was increased by 0.2% compared to the 1999 elections.

9. **Freepost Communication**

Watford Borough Council offered each candidate the chance to have one election communication delivered free to each household. The vast majority of the electors recalled having received a leaflet but very few said that it had affected whether or how they had voted.

10. **Electronic Voting**

Broxbourne BC and Three Rivers BC counted the votes cast electronically each using a different method. In each case it was believed that a more accurate count was achieved. Although both systems appeared to have the potential for delivering results more quickly a number of technical and procedural refinements were identified.

11. **Electronic Voting and Counting**

Bury MBC, Salford City and Stratford on Avon DC votes were cast and counted electronically using a touch screen voting machine. The verification of ballot papers appeared to be quicker and more accurate. Voters reported few problems adapting to the new system but again there were a number of technical and logistical problems. Electronic voting and counting on a "full cost" basis proved to be very expensive.

12. The remaining pilot schemes for the 2000 election experimented in the extension of the entitlement to postal voting on demand. This has not been explored in this paper as this is now a general entitlement introduced by the Representation of the People Act 2000.

13. The Home Office asked local authorities to pose four questions of each pilot scheme:

♦ Was turnout higher than it would otherwise have been?
♦ Did voters find the new arrangements easy to use?
♦ Did the new procedures lead to any increase in personation or other electoral fraud?
♦ Did the procedures lead to any increase or a saving in expenditure?

14. The table at Annexe A provides an overall answer to those questions for each type of pilot. It seems that turnout was noticeably higher than it might otherwise have been only where votes could be cast by post; that voters welcomed almost all the experiments and found them easy to understand and use; that there was no evidence of an increase in fraud in the 2000 pilots though equally a recognition that some of the piloted schemes could lead to such an increase; and that all the new arrangements resulted in an increase in costs albeit that these varied between schemes and authorities.

15. **The 2002 Pilots**

At the local elections held in May 2002 in England, 30 local authorities tested a range of innovations aimed at encouraging participation in the elections. These included, widening the range of voting methods, improving the efficiency of vote counting and increasing the information available to voters.

16. The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate any pilot scheme and although it believes that it is essential to respond to the changing lifestyles and new expectations of the electorate it is also important for these innovations to provide levels of security at least equivalent to more traditional methods of voting.

17. The Commissions evaluation report on the 2002 pilots schemes was published on the 1st August 2002 and extracts from that report follow. The Executive Summary within the report states that the Commission believes the pilots successfully widened the choice of voting method available to those interested in voting and secured significant increases in turnout in some pilot areas. It also recognises that although there were concerns in some areas about a possible increased risk of fraud, the Commission has identified no evidence that these fears were realised in practice.

18. **Turnout and public opinion**

In a majority of pilot authorities turnout was up by comparison both with recent local elections and with non-pilot local elections in 2002. In some areas turnout increased significantly – even matching the general election figures of 2001. There were also differences in performance between different pilot areas. The technology based pilot schemes appeared to have no significant impact on turnout but they did increase choice and flexibility for voters.

19. An NOP survey carried out at the time of the election suggests that overall a majority of respondents in the 13 pilot areas covered were aware of the new methods and 23% said that the pilots had encouraged them to vote (although 72% said it made no difference!) 45% said the new methods made the process better. Those in postal voting areas were more positive about the new methods both overall and in terms of specific attributes.

20. **Accessibility**

The Commission has recognised that the desire to make voting more convenient and easier should not disadvantage particular groups. This is a particular concern in relation to the elderly, disabled people, people with limited literacy skills and those with English as a second language. The pilot schemes generated mostly positive feedback from a survey of disabled voters co-ordinated by Scope. However, concerns were expressed about maintaining the secrecy of the ballot for some disabled people in all postal elections. Overall Scope agreed that the pilots had provided a valuable opportunity to plan the accessibility of future voting mechanisms.

21. **Security**

Across the pilots areas there was significant concern expressed by a minority of electors and by some candidates and agents regarding security and the risk that all postal voting and technology based voting might increase the incidence of fraud or malpractice. However, the Commission have stated that it was not made aware of any evidence to suggest that the procedures led to any increase of personation or any other electoral offences.

22. The Commission has recognised the concerns expressed about the potential loss of privacy and confidentiality involved in all postal voting and remote electronic voting. Those who wish to vote privately from their own homes will not have the same safeguards as those casting their vote in the traditional way. It is important to ask how real these safeguards are in practice and to examine how far perceptions that protection might be reduced impact on the willingness of the electorate to use the new methods.

23. The Commission suggests that the benchmark against which pilot schemes should be tested is not a 100% secure system as there are security and other weaknesses inherent in traditional polling station voting. The key issues relate simply to voter confidence as the traditional system of voting by pencil and paper at polling stations has a high degree of voter confidence despite its inherent flaws. To some extent these can be addressed by providing appropriate information and reassurance about the security features of the new voting schemes but it is also important that the new schemes demonstrate their robustness.

24. The Commission also believes technology should be able to provide opportunities to increase the security of elections, for example, by improving the verification of identity before voting and also increase accessibility, for example, by providing voting information online in ethnic minority languages.

25. **All Postal Voting**

Postal voting undoubtedly proved to be a success in terms of improving voter turnout. Turnout doubled in South Tyneside and almost doubled in Chorley, Gateshead and the pilot wards of Crawley. The average turnout for all postal pilots was well above that for conventional ballots in the country as a whole. However close consideration should be given as to why some all postal ballots failed to make significant differences to turnout.

26. One factor influencing voter turnout is that some areas have a history of postal voting. For example turnout in Stevenage (which conducted a previous pilot and has undertaken active promotion of postal voting on demand) contrasts sharply with Hackney which has a very low take up of postal voting(less than 1%). There is also some evidence that turnout was influenced by the type of declaration of identity used as illustrated by

the fact that Chorley secured 62% with no declaration whereas Hackney witnessed a drop in turnout to 32% with the standard declaration.

27. However, did the declaration of identity prevent abuse? The signatures on the declarations are rarely checked, if at all during a normal election, nor is there any obligation on the Returning Officer to do so. In practice, the declaration serves only as a potential deterrent to fraud rather than a means of identifying attempts at personation, its existence may also have reassured some voters about the safeguards in place. It is difficult to determine the extent to which those who did not vote were deterred by the need to complete the declaration of identity but significant voters in the pilot schemes had their votes treated as invalid because of failure to complete the form correctly. Where the declaration was simplified or removed altogether, higher turnouts were recorded with no apparent increase in the incidence of fraud.

28 The fact that all postal voting can significantly increase turnout has been established. Both politicians and members of the public have voiced their concerns about the implications for fraud although the use of the standard declaration of identity may have brought with it more problems than solutions. The Commission have recognised that the number of pilot schemes involved in changing the declaration was too small in 2002 to make specific recommendations about how best to replace the standard declaration.

Refer to the table at Annexe B for a summary of the all postal pilot schemes.

29. **Multi Channel and Electronic Voting**

Nine authorities tested different voting mechanisms using information and communications technology. All the schemes offered postal voting and traditional polling stations alongside. The hardware and software performed largely successfully without any significant problems.

30. The Commission have recognised that timetable pressures, as a result of a less than efficient central procurement process, were the single greatest risk to the successful delivery of many of the projects. In many places both the local authorities and the suppliers had to undertake initial stages of the system design and system building before the project had been approved. Time constraints also meant normal good practice could not always be followed.

31. Voters' feedback suggested they found electronic voting easy, convenient and quick to use and the pilots appear to have provided a vital first building block in establishing public confidence. However the Commission have concluded that the evidence in relation to turnout is unconvincing and further pilots will be necessary to build on the lessons from 2002. The Commission also have recognised that electronic voting pilots that were exclusively polling station based did not increase convenience for the voter or for the election officials at the polling station, although they did facilitate the accuracy and efficiency of the count. The cost effectiveness of such schemes without the option for remote voting appears to be questionable.

32. The Commission believes this type of scheme should not be a high priority for future pilots especially in elections run on a "first past the post" system where the counting process is not complex. They believe that technology based voting has made a good start but it would be premature to suggest that the government is well on its way to delivering against its commitment to having an e-enabled election some time after 2006.

33. **Other Pilots**

There were 15 authorities that used electronic counting machines. The speed at which results were produced varied but all the mechanisms appeared to operate well, the only significant problems arising through human error. The authorities involved reported several benefits including greater accuracy in counting and making it easier to match ballot papers with declarations that are returned at different times in different envelopes.

34. Although a number of the e-voting schemes provided an opportunity to vote early there were only three pilots that tested new voting hours with traditional polling stations. All three schemes appeared to have little success in attracting new voters.
There was only one authority that tested ways to provide voters with more information about the candidates and here too turnout did not appear to be significantly increased.

Refer to Annexe C for a summary of all the 2002 pilot schemes.

35. **Future Pilot Programme**

The Commission have recognised that it is important that future pilot schemes continue to develop multiple channels of voting to increase choice and flexibility for electors and that over time remote voting may become the norm for most elections as it would appear to be more convenient for many voters. In the medium term remote voting may be achieved by postal voting; over the longer term by internet access and digital TV.

36. The Commission have also recommended that funding for all future pilots (over and above the cost of running a traditional election) should be provided by central government. However the Office of the Deputy Prime Minster have now stated that only e-voting pilots will receive funding from central government.

The Commission have also recommended that pilots should be conducted across whole authorities unless exceptional circumstances apply. Similarly a lack of cross party support for a pilot scheme should not automatically be a bar on proceeding.

37. Other recommendations include:

- o Further pilots of all postal voting should be undertaken at the local elections in May 2003 but must be whole council pilots in order to test scalability.

- The necessary legislation should be implemented as soon as possible to allow for parish council elections and local authority by elections to be conducted on all out postal voting without the need to apply for pilot status.
- The traditional declaration of identity requiring two signatures should not be used in future pilots. All postal pilot bids should incorporate proposals for testing alternatives and methods of testing levels of fraud and attempted fraud should be regarded as part of the scheme.
- A wide range of suppliers should continue to contribute towards the piloting of technology based voting mechanisms.
- The Government should establish whether there is a clear basis for the provision of marked registers to candidates in advance of the close of poll showing which electors have voted. If the legal issues can be satisfactorily addressed the provision of the marked register should be tested in further all postal and multi channel voting pilots to establish whether the right balance can be struck between the benefits to the political parties and the risk of public hostility.
- More pilots aimed at increasing the information available to voters about candidates would be welcome, both stand alone and linked to electronic voting – evaluation must examine qualitative and quantitative issues.
- Electronic counting pilots should use technology which is suitable for use in the medium to long term
- Early voting instead of Thursday voting should not be piloted further. Future pilots should focus on testing the potential benefits of adopting weekend voting or voting over several days.

38. **Consultation**

The Electoral Commission consulted widely all the local authorities which took part in the 2000 and 2002 pilot schemes and an analysis of that consultation is included in the body of this report.

Furthermore an email from the Deputy Prime Minister's Office was received on the 9th September to the author of this report. The email gave advanced warning of the electoral pilot programme which has been expanded for 2003-05. The prospectus inviting local authorities to take part in the electoral pilots has now been launched and the closing date for applications is the29th November.

39. **Options**

Members may wish to consider the following options:

a) To submit an application to the Electoral Commission to carry out an experimental pilot scheme in the May 2003 elections.

b) Not to take part in the pilot scheme but to promote the election in other ways and in particular the availability of postal votes

40. **Analysis**

Option A: Members may wish to consider whether to submit an application to test a pilot scheme in the 2003 elections and if so in what area of innovation. Members are advised to consider the following factors:

♦ Whether innovative voting methods which carry a risk of failure should be tested in a finely balanced authority like York. The majority of pilots to date are in areas where there is one dominant political party.

♦ The pilot will have to be carried across the whole council area

♦ The elections will be held for the first time on the new ward boundaries and traditional voting trends may be difficult to predict.

♦ The potential increase in costs to the Council of holding a pilot scheme

♦ The additional call on IT and other staffing resources

41. The Deputy Prime Minister's Office have stated that £30 million has been allocated as part of the 2002 Spending Review. They are looking in particular for authorities to undertake e-voting pilots as the way forward and as stated in paragraph 36 above central funding will only be available to e-voting pilots. Councils are invited to develop and submit applications to undertake the following pilots:

• Remote electronic voting through internet, interactive digital television, SMS text messaging, and touch tone telephones

• Other e-voting from a conventional polling station perhaps using touch sensitive screens

• E-counting (The Deputy Prime Minister's Office believe that because the lessons from previous e-counts is well documented where e-counting is the sole e-enabled activity of a pilot scheme, in the case of an all postal pilot, a Government funding contribution will not be available.

42. They are also interested to know if authorities wish to undertake all postal pilots which should include proposals for alternative fraud and security arrangements. The pilot schemes sought in 2003 are those which:

• Make voting more straightforward for the public;

• Make elections more accessible, either by making it more convenient to vote or by making voting more attractive to people currently less likely to vote;

• Make the administration of elections more efficient and cost effective; and

• Maintain or increase the level of security at elections.

43. The prospectus also states that the decision to approve pilot schemes rests with the Deputy Prime Minister who will seek the views of the Electoral Commission and the Local Government Association.

The Commission advise that pilot schemes need to ensure that any new method of voting is at least as secure, if not more secure than, conventional electoral practices. Any new systems must be robust and must attract public confidence if they are to succeed. All pilot schemes must also have a built in means of testing the impact of the innovations – including the implications for security and fraud – and must incorporate plans for promoting the pilot to the public.

The main focus of the 2003 pilot programme will be innovations that have not been piloted, or where specific issues have not yet been tested fully

44. As indicated in paragraph 40 above I would not recommend Members to experiment with an e-voting pilot although I would recommend that if Members agreed to submit an application for an all postal pilot that that be accompanied by an application to use e-counting. The technology would appear to be fairly sound in this area and would considerably speed up what will otherwise be a much longer counting process than usual. However, it should be noted that indications from the Deputy Prime Minister's Office are that funds will not be available for e-counting with an all postal ballot.

45. If Members wish to pilot an all postal ballot it is important to incorporate in the application innovative ideas which have not been tested in past pilots and to include in the scheme measures to test security and fraud. This should also be coupled with measures to ensure that the voting method is more straightforward and to provide a high level of publicity.

Members may wish to consider the following points which could be included in an application for an all postal pilot:

a) Prior to the election to provide a high level of publicity aimed in the first instance to all electors followed by special campaigns targeting those electors with disabilities. It is important that electors with disabilities are not disenfranchised by their inability to seek assistance in the postal voting ballot. This may be achieved by ;

- liaising with the various disability groups and ensuring information is produced in an audio format and on club news sheets.

- Providing a dedicated telephone helpline

- Providing a small team of mobile Presiding Officers and poll clerks linked to the helpline and available to go out to an elector's home during the day to offer personal advice and information on how to vote

- The provision of a number of delivery points in council buildings throughout the area for electors to hand deliver

their postal vote and to provide a dedicated member of staff available to offer advice if required. All delivery points to have disabled access

b) The Declaration of Identity is retained and the ballot paper number is printed as usual on the face

c) The need for a witness is discarded (making voting more straightforward)

d) The second envelope is discarded (making the exercise more cost effective and voting more straightforward)

e) The Declaration of Identity has the name and address of the voter pre printed on the declaration and may state, for example, "I am the person JOHN SMITH of 2 CONEY STREET, YORK to whom the ballot paper has been sent"………………………………… signature of voter. (increasing the level of security at the election)

f) The postal vote return envelope will have on the face a printed bar code and as the envelopes are received back the bar codes will be scanned and this will produce a marked copy of the register to be made available to the political parties on a daily basis

g) After the poll a percentage of signatures on returned declarations will be checked against the signatures on the scanned annual canvass registration forms (increasing the level of security at elections)

h) The official mark using the traditional stamping instrument could be discarded and a more innovate method of marking the ballot paper could be tested such as a water mark in the paper or a printed mark (increasing the efficiency of the issue of the postal ballot papers but at the same time maintaining the level of security and eliminating the danger of unstamped papers)

i) Extend the deadline for the replacement of spoilt or lost postal ballot papers from 5.00 p.m. on the day before polling to 5.00p.m. on polling day(increasing the level of service to voters)

j) It may also be possible to link an all postal pilot to other innovative ideas such as increasing information to voters by publishing on the Council web site political party manifestos and information on candidates.

46. Option B: Members may wish to continue what York has always championed and that is the promotion of local elections and the encouragement of electors in local democratic engagement.

A number of initiatives could include:

♦ An additional pre election poll card to be sent out in February providing current information as to the names held in the register for the property – the date of the forthcoming election – the location of the polling

station – the alternative method of postal voting which is now available on demand. The card will be delivered to allow sufficient time for new additions to the register to be dealt with within statutory deadlines. A further poll card will be sent out nearer to the election with updated information.

♦ An ongoing poster and promotion campaign which could include beer mats, library book markers etc.

♦ Local radio advertising

♦ Advertising on the local buses

However, this would be entirely at the expense of the Council and would not come within the anticipated additional central government funding as recommended by the Commission.

At the May 1999 City and Parish Council elections similar initiatives were carried out which covered, television advertising, beer mats and book markers, early voting signs at polling stations, flower beds, bus advertising and general voter awareness regarding postal voting. Although York was above the national average only a 37.14% turnout was achieved.

The 2001 Parliamentary Election introduced for the first time postal voting on demand and this generated approximately 5000 applications across the council area as compared to 1800 previously. Members may also wish to consider building on this facility and encouraging voters to recognise they have a choice of either voting traditionally at their polling station or remotely by post. This campaign has already started in the electoral canvass which commenced in August by promoting postal voting on a separate leaflet which was delivered with the registration form.

Again Members must be aware this would add substantial costs to the elections budget as this would be in addition to traditional voting methods.

47. **Financial Implications**

The cost of the 1999 City and Parish Council elections amounted to £87,000 and this was purely for the expenses incurred in administering and staffing the election. Additional costs were incurred on advertising the election. If traditional voting methods are used and no postal voting campaign organised it would not be unreasonable to expect the 2003 elections to incur the same expense plus an additional figure for inflation the total figure is estimated to be £90,000.

An additional £5,000 would cover a traditional advertising campaign.

48. If postal voting on demand was promoted together with a traditional election this could easily attract up to 10,000 postal votes.
The cost of administering this number of postal votes together with a modest advertising campaign and employment of temporary staff would

require an additional budget of £10,000 taking the cost of the 2003 elections to £100,000.

The number of permanent postal votes prior to this year's canvass was 2873. During the current canvass electors have been given the opportunity on the registration form to apply to vote by post at the 2003 elections and to the date of this report approximately 4500 applications have been received. There is therefore a clear indication that electors are eager to take up this convenient method of voting.

49. The Deputy Prime Minister's Office have stated that for the 2003 pilots central funding will be allocated only to the e-voting pilots as the pilot schemes mentioned in paragraph 42 do not have the investment needs of the electronic pilots.

50. If Members decide to apply to carry out an all postal ballot pilot the full cost of the scheme must be paid for by the Council. In the 2002 schemes where all postal voting was piloted throughout a whole council area (excluding the cost of e-counting) costs varied from £58,000 to £250,000 ranging from .62p to £1.91 per elector. Electorates varied within these authorities from 60,090 to 178,027. The table at Annexe B shows that where the costs of all postal ballots were lower than those of traditional methods these were generally in authorities where no declaration of identity was issued. Thus reducing the costs of stationery and simplifying the process of the issue and receipt.

The cost of e-counting linked to all postal ballot pilots in 2002 varied from £12,000 - £32,000 and as there is no evidence to suggest any reason for the variation this may only be due to the charges of different suppliers. In my view the cost of e-counting would be approximately the cost of a traditional count in York therefore there would unlikely to be additional costs.

A first estimate at the cost of an all postal ballot show this is likely to be in the range of £110k-£120k but costs may be reduced if it is possible to seek a discounted service from Royal Mail and to automate the issue of the votes. Further work is required to finalise these costs and further savings may be recognised but if Members decide to proceed with a pilot scheme it is important to progress this paper through the Council's formal procedures if the 29th November closing date is to be achieved.

Set against the cost of an all postal ballot in York certain savings can be recognised from the £90k estimate of a traditional ballot. For example in the 1999 elections the following payments were made which would not be required in an all postal ballot:

Hire of polling stations	£9350
Delivery/collection of voting screens	£3000
Presiding Officer's mileage allowance	£700
Purchase of election equipment	£3300
Polling Staff fees gross	£15000
Hand delivery of poll cards	£13600
	£44950

Total + inflation	£46500

It should also be noted that in a traditional ballot City Council staff are generally employed as presiding officers and poll clerks. It has always been recognised that by way of an incentive for staff to assist in what is a very long day with a poor level of remuneration they are allowed a days leave of absence with pay from their council duties. The cost of this could also be recognised as a saving in an all postal ballot.

Members may also wish to compare the costs per voter:
In the 1999 elections 37.14% of the electorate of 143,000 voted at a cost of £87k this equates to £1.64 per voter
In the 2003 elections the estimated electorate will be at least 145,000 and if the turnout is conservatively estimated to be 55% and the cost of the all postal ballot a midway figure of £115k this equates to £1.44 per voter.

51. Legal Implications

Pilots to be conducted in accordance with the relevant legislation

52. Recommendations

Members are asked to consider whether they wish to undertake a pilot scheme for the May 2003 elections and if so which scheme. If a pilot scheme is not the preferred option do Members want to expand and promote traditional methods?

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Background Papers:

Elections The 21st Century Model	LGA
Electoral Arrangement Pilots	LGIU
Electoral Pilot Schemes	DTLR
New Ways to Vote:e-voting	Electoral Commission
A New Vision – Four Years On	LGIU
Modernising Elections	Electoral Commission
Local Elections 2003 Prospectus	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister