

COMMITTEE:	SCRUTINY
DATE:	11 NOVEMBER 2002
SUBJECT:	VOTING PROCEDURES
REPORT OF:	HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND MEMBER SERVICES MANAGER
Ward(s):	ALL
Purpose:	To consider existing electoral voting procedures, the result of research conducted with Eastbourne residents, and to explore possible future alternatives that are being considered at a national level.
Contact:	Peter Finnis, Head of Democratic Services, Telephone 01323 415003 or internally on extension 5003.
Recommendations:	Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider and comment on the content of this report and make any recommendations considered appropriate. It is also proposed that the results of the town-wide survey be sent to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Electoral Commission for their information. The report should also be passed to local Party Agents.

1.0	<u>Introduction</u>
1.1	The subject of this report was included in the Annual Scrutiny Programme of Work approved by the Scrutiny Committee on 10 June 2002 and full Council on 24 July 2002. The opportunity is being taken here to make Members aware of national developments and local feedback in respect of the future of voting in elections.

2.0	<h2 style="text-align: center;"><u>Service Plan Task Group</u></h2>
2.1	<p>As previously set up by the Scrutiny Committee, the Task Group looking into the content of the Democratic Services Divisional Service Plan has met twice and concluded its work. The Task Group comprised Councillor Lacey OBE (Chairman) and Councillor Mrs Teso. As a result of the fact that there were no issues raised other than concerns in respect of Members IT which were attributable elsewhere in the organisation, it was agreed that no separate report on the Task Group's findings was required for submission to this committee.</p>
2.2	<p>However, the Service Plan Task Group did take the opportunity to discuss the issue of voting procedures and compared our current practice with the procedures of two other Authorities (Torbay and Southport), and the outcome of postal vote pilot schemes at three other Authorities (Hackney, Preston and South Tyneside).</p>
2.3	<p>The Task Group acknowledged that the organisation of the electoral count in Eastbourne in May 2002 was to a high standard and much improved upon that of the previous year (although the special circumstances of both the 2001 (combined parliamentary and county) and 2002 (all-Council) elections should be noted). Whilst it was understood that Torbay and Southport were both high performers in this area it was noted that both these councils spent a budget of around £100,000 in the conduct of local elections whereas Eastbourne's costs this year totalled £33,000.</p>
2.4	<p>Of three councils who had conducted postal vote pilot schemes, the following information was presented to the Task Group:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · HACKNEY – All Postal Votes across the whole Authority. Turnout 31.9% - Elections combined with Mayoral Referendum. Poor turnout attributed in part to late approval for the Pilot from the Secretary of State restricting the time available for voter awareness work. Also, negative media coverage and a large degree of voter confusion in respect of the paperwork, the latter being seen as a particular problem due to 38.75% of the electorate being of minority ethnicity. · PRESTON – All postal votes run in two wards resulting in an increased turnout of 15% in those wards compared to the previous year. This also compared favourably with an overall 5% turnout increase in other wards run on conventional lines. · SOUTH TYNESIDE - All Postal Votes across the whole Authority. Turnout 54.71% - This represented an overall increase in turnout of 28%. The success of

2.5	<p>The Task Group was divided in opinion in respect of the potential merit of postal vote elections. Councillor Lacey expressed concerns that there was no clear audit trail, the system was too open to error and fraud, it is an apparently expensive process, poor turnout in one of the Pilots, and the fact that it would effectively require political parties to sustain a much longer campaign period. Councillor Mrs Teso was in favour of postal vote elections in principle but accepted that there were associated issues of concern that needed resolving.</p>
2.6	<p>A total of 13 councils had conducted all-postal pilots in May 2002 and from information now published by the Electoral Commission it is apparent that the increase voting levels demonstrated in the above examples are typical. Hackney was the only case where turnout fell. The others recorded an increase in the turnout of between 8 and 30 percentage points above The average for the country as a whole was 15 percentage points. The Commission in their report state:-</p> <p>"The significant increases in turnout in all-postal areas, combined with the absence of any evidence of fraud or malpractice, have gone a long way towards establishing the potential benefits of all-postal voting in the future".</p>
3.0	<p><u>Alternative Voting Methods & Government Initiatives</u></p>
3.1	<p>The last few years have seen more change and debate on future change in the country's electoral system than at any time in recent history. In 1998, the Government published their paper "Modern Local Government - In Touch with the People" proposing widespread changes in local</p>

	<p>to voting methods and an expectation on the part of Government that changing the way we vote will increase public interest and involvement.</p>
3.2	<p>For the 1999 general election, postal voting on demand was introduced (with no reason being required). This doubled the take-up of postal votes. Rolling registration was also introduced to improve the accuracy of electoral registers. Councils were also allowed to operate electoral pilot schemes designed to evaluate different voting methods.</p>

The Government has now published a further consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy. It believes that the greatest potential benefits in terms of more convenient participation through e-voting lie in remote on-line voting. Computer-assisted systems might also bring benefits in terms of cost and time. The Government has sought comments to inform the future direction of experiment and research. The medium term aim is that there should be some sort of e-enabled general election sometime after 2006.

The Government's consultation closed on 31 October and a formal response will be issued in due course. This, however, will not be the end of the story. Far from it. A further round of electoral pilots is planned for May 2003 and again in 2004. The government will need to set standards for e-voting systems and consider what elements of infrastructure it should provide to support their roll-out of electronic voting. Legislation will also be needed.

4.0	<u>Security Concerns</u>
4.1	The Government acknowledges that remote on-line voting poses the stiffest challenge in terms of design and security. In our view E-voting systems provide less accountability and reliability and greater opportunity for fraud than traditional methods. People may assume that e-voting is much like banking or airline ticketing but there are important differences. With these other systems there is a physical data trail that allows for verification. E-voting has few of these safeguards and no currently available system can be fully safeguarded. Internet and text-message voting are considered less reliable and safe

from interference. This is not to say that these concerns cannot be addressed and secure systems developed.

4.2

The Electoral Commission believes however that concerns expressed by a minority of electors and some candidates and agents regarding security and the risk that all-postal or technology-based voting might increase the incidence of fraud or malpractice are not well founded. They are unaware of any evidence to date to suggest that the procedures led to an increase in personation or any other electoral offences or malpractice in the pilot areas.

5.0	<u>Consultations</u>
5.1	<p>The vast majority of Local Authorities across the country have identified problems with voter apathy and low turnout over many years. However, each area is different and it is important to consult locally to obtain the views of the electorate. This year's National Local Democracy Week took place from 14-18 October 2002. In Eastbourne we devoted the period leading up to Local Democracy Week to conducting a town wide survey in order to gauge the following issues:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The level of voter awareness. · Voter motivation and the reasons people do or do not vote. · Future voting options.
5.2	<p>Ahead of Local Democracy Week, every household in the town received a brief questionnaire with their Electoral Canvass Form with the opportunity to return it to us in a freepost envelope. The same questions were available for people to access electronically and fill in online on the Council's web site. Finally, during Local Democracy Week, Democratic Services staff were present for three days in the town centre discussing the issues with local residents and obtaining more responses.</p>
5.3	<p>The volume of response to the consultation has been excellent giving us a very detailed amount of feedback. The overall results of the consultation exercise are appended to this report. However, it is worth summarising some key issues here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · AWARENESS – It is a major concern that such a low number of people can identify their ward councillors particularly as the other awareness related questions relating to ward identity, Council services and recognition of the Council Leader were answered correctly by the majority. · MOTIVATION – Clearly there is a problem with the perception that Local Government lacks power. However, taken together, the criticisms in respect of lack of information on election candidates, lack of local political activity and over-politicising of local issues are also matters for concern. The survey confirmed that availability and location of polling stations has minimal impact and this is likely to diminish further in the light of growing preferences towards postal voting. · THE FUTURE – The key point arising here is the overwhelming majority in favour of postal voting. This is in line with the fact that of all the electoral pilots that have taken place nationally over the last couple of year, postal vote pilots have been the most successful by far.

6.0	<u>Implications</u>
6.1	There are no implications directly arising from this report. However, any future change in voting procedures will be likely to have a radical effect both on financial costs and the numbers of staff employed in the conduct of elections. There are also likely to be significant equality implications as any voting process must be inclusive and accessible to all.
7.0	<u>Summary</u>
7.1	Given the results of electoral pilots conducted nationally and our own local feedback it is perhaps time to consider whether there is any need to pursue further piloted alternatives at national or local level. All the time that there is uncertainty in respect of likely future voting methods, it will restrict the degree of investment and commitment towards any one of the alternatives, particularly in smaller Authorities with limited resources like Eastbourne.
7.2	The Government's attachment to a "high tec" approach with remote on-line voting as the goal is a high-risk strategy. It will take some years to develop and perfect the required systems, be very costly and offer no guarantee of security. Retention of traditional methods of voting will still be required (only 40% of households are currently on-line) and the costs and complexity of having to administer elections with a multiplicity of concurrent voting systems should not be underrated. It is considered that postal voting offers as much, if not more, convenience to all voters and can be implemented quickly at minimal additional cost. Indeed the costs of running an all-postal election are broadly similar to a traditional election once one-off publicity and setting up costs associated with the introduction of the first all postal elections are discounted.
7.3	It is our view that Government should now have more than enough evidence to be in a position to make a positive statement endorsing the future of elections being focused on postal voting. Having made this commitment, any future pilots can focus on perfecting this method and addressing existing concerns in respect of security issues and over-bureaucratic procedures.

<p>Peter Finnis</p> <p>Head of Democratic Services</p> <p>David Robinson</p> <p>Member Services Manager</p>	
<p>Background Papers:</p> <p>The Background Papers used in compiling this report were as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In the Service of Democracy – Government Consultation Paper on a Policy for Electronic Democracy. 2. The Implementation of Electronic Voting in the UK – Local Government Association Report. 3. Modernising Elections - A Strategic Evaluation of the 2002 electoral pilots. Paper by the Electoral Commission published August 2002. 4. Article on Electoral Pilot Schemes – Local Government Chronicle, May 2002. 5. Article on Electronic Voting in Europe by Roy Loudon of Powervote Ltd. 6. Newspaper article (Guardian 18 July 2002) on E-democracy by David Walter. 7. Reports on the outcome of 2002 Postal Vote Pilot Schemes undertaken in Hackney, Preston and South Tyneside. 8. Information on current traditional voting procedures in Southport and Torbay. 9. Information arising from discussions at the Service Plan Task Group meetings held on 22 July 2002 and 3 September 2002. 10. Content of returned questionnaires in response to town-wide consultation. 11. Newspaper article (Guardian 17 October 2002) on lecture to Royal Academy of Engineering by Professor Rebecca Mercuri. 12. Absent Voters Review - Consultation paper published by the Electoral Commission October 2002. <p>To inspect or obtain copies of background papers please refer to the contact officer listed above.</p> <p>See also the Electoral Commission web-site at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk</p>	

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