

6 April, 2017

Elections and proposed pilot to require voters to use identification

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr S Coughlan – Leader of the Council

Executive Summary:

The Government responded in December 2016 to Sir Eric Pickles report on Securing the Ballot August 2016, where 50 recommendations were made. Sir Eric's report identified, amongst other things, that one of the most significant issues in relation to polling stations is whether voters should be required to produce a form of identification before being allowed to vote. This was recommendation 8 of the report. The Government have agreed that the viability of voter identification options should be explored further. At the moment there is a suggestion that electoral pilot schemes could be piloted at local government elections in England in 2018. The Securing the Ballot report is based primarily around issues that occurred in Tower Hamlets. The extract in relation to Identification at Polling Stations is set out in the Background Papers to this report.

Reason for scrutiny:

To provide an overview of the proposed pilot to the Committee.

Background Papers

Cabinet Office – Electoral Integrity Pilots
Securing the Ballot – Sir Eric Pickles (extract August 2016)

Resource and legal considerations:

Increase in the cost of funding all elections/increased risk of an election petition

Citizen impact:

Impacts on all eligible electorate of the Borough

1. Report

The Cabinet Office have only provided very limited information at this stage but they

are principally looking for local authorities to trial options for requiring electors to present proof of identity in order to cast their ballot in polling stations at the local elections in 2018.

There are two objectives:

Objective 1: That proposed ID at polling stations policy measures are proportional to the policy objective of reducing the opportunity for electoral fraud.

Objective 2: That the proposed ID at polling stations policy measures enhance public confidence in the security of the electoral system

Implementation

When the measures are piloted, all electors will be requested to present the ID as required.

When an elector is unable to present this ID, they will be refused a ballot paper and will not be able to vote

Current proposals for ID (still to be finalised)

Photographic ID

- Passport
- Drivers licence
- Other nationally recognised photographic identification
- Locally recognised form of photographic identification eg travel pass or library card

Non- photographic ID

- Utility bill
- Council tax bill
- Bank or building society statement
- A letter confirming electoral registration
- A bank card containing a signature
- Another suitable official document bearing a signature

Points to Consider/Observations prior to deciding whether or not to participate as a pilot.

Each Authority would be required to choose where in the Borough (which wards would be chosen to pilot the Model or would it be Borough wide). If you carried out the pilot across the whole Borough where would the control group be extracted from?

An extensive Communication exercise would need to take place to alert the voters to the change.

The use of a confirmation of electoral registration letter! There would be no difference to this than presenting an Official Poll Card at the polling station, unless the Confirmation letter had been issued to the person following the production of ID to the Electoral Registration Officer in person at the Elections Office. This alone would require a lot of manpower and additional problems would arise with late applications to the register and clerical errors.

The voting process would be a lot slower; stations would have to be bigger to accommodate more staff to carry out the processing. There is also potential for disorder at polling stations especially where staff were forced to challenge the right to vote. This in itself may be a disincentive for staff to volunteer for election duty.

Extra training of staff/ calibre of staff would be required with regards to scrutinising ID

Extra resources would need to be provided in relation to extra furniture and equipment at polling stations.

Detailed analysis both before the election and election day itself and after the election would have to be resourced in order to provide statistics and other information to effectively evaluate the pilot.

Would there be a spike in postal applications from people who could not provide ID? Would this increase the postal vote fraud potential?

Are a certain Demographic group less likely to have ID? When it comes to Registration these groups of people have another option (to provide attestation) no such option for voting would be trialled!!

With regards to Walsall demographics we could have people arriving to vote with ID with passports as ID who are wearing Hijabs. What protocol would be required so that the polling station staff could be satisfied that the ID was sufficient?

Where there was a close result (majorities can be very small in certain Wards) and electors had been refused a ballot paper on the grounds of no ID are you at risk of election petition?

Is the Returning Officer who is legally responsible prepared to take the risk and the potential impact on the council reputation if things were to go wrong and there was an electoral petition?

The small election team will face further administrative burden also having to provide the government with detailed analysis of the pilots when they are already facing extra administrative challenges brought about from the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration.


Conclusion

From the very limited information currently available it seems there would be a significant risk in participating in a pilot at this stage. The lead time into carrying out the pilot in 2018 is very short, and the rules in relation to the pilot are not yet finalised. To raise awareness it would have been more practicable to warn people at the 2017 election that ID would be trialled next time they were in the polling station. As mentioned previously the pilot is not without significant risk of election petition and damage to the council reputation as a consequence. It is also not clear whether or not there is a significant issue with people impersonating other voters at polling stations in Walsall.

It may be more practical if there was a political desire and willingness from the RO and interest from the Cabinet Office to simply explore the option of asking electors through a questionnaire, after they had voted, what types of ID they hold and if on election day they could have provided this ID in order to receive their ballot paper, however even this exercise would require careful planning.

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Appendix : Electoral Integrity Pilots prospectus

