



City of Westminster

# Committee Report

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Item No:

4

Date:

31 October 2006

Classification:

For General Release

Title of Report:

Electoral Issues

Report of:

Director of Legal and Administrative Services

Wards involved:

All

Policy context:

Not applicable

Financial summary:

Budget provision in the Business Plan for the City Council Elections in May 2006 was £340,000

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## 1. Summary

1. This report updates the Committee on a number of electoral issues.

## 2.2. Recommendation

- (i) That the Committee agrees in principle to apply to repeat the electronic count pilot at future City Council elections, subject to the approval of the necessary equipment at the time;
- (ii) That the Committee notes the remainder of the report.

## 3.3. City Council Elections: 4 May 2006

### (A) Electoral Pilots

#### 3.1

3.1 The City Council participated in a number of electoral pilots:

- Scanning of postal votes by daily batches
- Early voting at Hyde Park Barracks to encourage registration and voting by armed services personnel
- Electronic counting

- 3.2 The Electoral Commission has published its evaluations of all the electoral pilots conducted by the 21 local authorities who participated this year (compared to 30 pilot authorities in 2002).

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## Scanning Postal Votes

**3.23.3** The daily scanning of postal votes was primarily aimed at reducing the length of the count as the scanned votes were stored on the system and any doubtfuls were available for adjudication immediately the count started. After each daily scanning session the number of ballot papers scanned by ward were sent to the election agents so they could have a picture of the postal vote response. The returned Declarations of Identity were also scanned so that if there had been any challenge that a postal vote was fraudulent an immediate check could have been made on screen between the scanned signature from the postal vote application form and the scanned signature from the Declaration of Identity. In the event there have been no such challenges. However this form of signature checking was part of the recently enacted Electoral Administration Act 2006 and so is to be adopted for future elections.

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## Early Voting at Hyde Park Barracks

**3.33.4** Only 13.6% of the eligible electorate (military personnel and their families) participated in the early voting pilot at Hyde Park Barracks. Although the take-up was small it was appreciated by those who did vote. It had been intended to extend the pilot to the other 3 barracks in Westminster but at none of the others were there sufficient registered voters to make such an experiment worthwhile. It is also very evident that nationally military personnel are under-registered. The Electoral Commission and the MOD are currently working jointly on a campaign to register service voters. Partly due to the voting pilot in May, there has already been a good response from Hyde Park Barracks in this year's canvass to this registration campaign.

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## Electronic Count

**3.43.5** As in 2002, the electronic count went well, produced accurate results and the declarations were made much earlier than usual, saving probably at least 2 and half hours on a manual count. For the first time Westminster was the first London Borough to declare all its results.

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**3.53.6** Westminster and Lewisham piloted the same new and enhanced "X" mark recognition software from the suppliers DRS. The sensitivity of the software was set intentionally high to gain confidence in its accuracy. This resulted in a much higher percentage (nearly 13%) of ballot papers being passed for Standard Adjudication on screen than was originally anticipated. However the early scanning of postal votes had revealed this likely percentage% so adjustments were made at the count to earmark more personnel and large screens for standard adjudication so that the count was not delayed.

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**3.63.7** For the first time Westminster staff operated the scanner machines – as opposed to the equipment supplier's staff (DRS). Most count staff had worked with DRS equipment before and many were trained this time in a variety of tasks so that they could be transferred around the count to help manage peaks in workload as the count progressed.

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3.73.8 There was a bottle-neck in Returning officer Adjudication, which slowed down the count to some degree. Two PC stations had been earmarked for Returning Officer adjudication to enable two different wards to be adjudicated in parallel, but in the event some election agents were unhappy with this process being conducted in parallel although they had been requested to appoint sub-agents.

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3.83.9 Far fewer scanners were used in 2006 than in 2002 when a number had laid idle for significant periods of time. The scanners in 2006 were more fully occupied than in 2002, but having fewer in 2006 did not slow down the count.

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3.93.10 The progress of the count display did not work as well as had been hoped, but useful lessons were learned. Similarly piloting a "fast-track" process once all the ballot boxes for one ward had been registered did not work as well as hoped as a batch from the first ward "fast tracked" - Tachbrook - had to be scanned 3 times and there were contentious ballot papers at Returning Officer adjudication.

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3.103.11 Overall there were only minor drawbacks to the count and the Electoral Commission judged that "the count process was effective, well planned and well received by stakeholders". Westminster also benefited in that many of the candidates and agents were familiar with the e-counting system from the last City Council elections in 2002 and the two GLA elections that had previously used the same DRS system.

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3.113.12 In addition to evaluators from the Electoral Commission, the count was also observed by representatives from the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA), representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the GLA. DRS (the count suppliers) were subsequently successful in winning the contract along with ERS (Electoral Reform Services) to supply the count equipment for the Scottish Parliament and Scottish local authority elections that are being held on 3 May 2007.

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3.123.13 The cost of the electronic count was over £150,000, but the Government has agreed to contribute over £97,000 towards the cost of the electronic count pilot elements, so there will be an overall saving on the original City Council elections budget (£340,000).

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3.133.14 It is hoped that the Government will agree both to pilot electronic counting at a Parliamentary General election and in due course to local authorities being able to adopt electronic counting without needing prior approval from the Government as an electoral pilot.

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## (B) Turnout

3.154 Turnout at elections in Westminster has generally been declining and at a faster rate than the average in Greater London. Although this trend was reversed across London in May 2006, the increase in Westminster was not as high as the London average.

Year	Westminster %	Greater London Average %
1990	51	48
1994	46	46
1998	32	34
2002	27	32
2006	30	38

3.167 In 2006 only Kensington & Chelsea of the other London Boroughs had a lower turnout than Westminster (compared to 4 Boroughs having had a lower turnout than Westminster in 2002).

3.83.17 Turnout did vary considerably by ward – the highest being Churchill on over 38% and the lowest Westbourne on over 24%. This compares to the highest in 2002 being Tachbrook on 37% and the lowest Knightsbridge & Belgravia on 22%.

3.189 As in 2006, questionnaires were issued to a random sample of households on the Electoral Register for views on how the elections were administered in Westminster and possible ways that might help to improve turnout. For the first time a "Voter's Guide" was issued with each "Postal Vote Card" and "Poll Card" that gave general information on voting. This was aimed in particular at first time voters to help explain the voting process and encourage turnout. Over 500 questionnaires were returned and attached as Appendix A is a summary of the main results compared to those in 2002, when the results were very similar.

## (C) Polling Places

A few new polling places were used for the first time, but there were no significant issues with any of them.

## 44. Register of Electors

4.1 The annual household canvas is currently underway and the target is to achieve a response rate above last year's 82% response by 1 December 2006. Canvassing will continue into the New Year to ensure that the response

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rate continues to rise during the currency of the Register and to match the 93% response rate achieved at the close of the current year's Register.

## 5. Review of Parliamentary Boundaries

- 5.1 It is hoped that the new pattern of Parliamentary Constituency boundaries will be introduced and approved by Parliament in the forthcoming session as the intention is that the new boundaries will be in place for the next General Election.

### ~~6-6.~~ Electoral Administration Act 2006

- 6.1 The Act has introduced a number of measures aimed at improving electoral Registration, participation at elections and the security of the vote.
- 6.2 The principal measures include:
- (a) Establishing a national on-line record of electors (CORE). This will establish a common platform and standardise the transmission of data held by electoral registration officers to each other and the political parties.
  - (b) Strengthens the duty on the Electoral Registration Officer to compile an accurate Electoral Register.
  - (c) Enables anyone newly moved into an area to register up to 11 days before an election, i.e. after an election has been called.
  - (d) Requires all postal voters to provide personal identifiers - a signature and date of birth. All existing postal voters will have to complete a new form to provide this – anticipated to be in the New Year once Regulations are enacted. The DCA are proposing to award local authorities a one-off grant towards the cost of this process.
  - (e) Local authorities will be under a duty to carry out a review of polling places every 4 years.
  - (f) Candidates for elections will be able to use their common names on the ballot paper and will be prevented from standing in more than one constituency. Photographs of candidates on ballot papers are to be piloted.
  - (g) Certain election documents may be translated into other languages
  - (h) The penalty for offences relating to postal and proxy voting are strengthened.
  - (i) There is to be marked lists of those who vote by post in the same way as there is a marked Register of Electors of those who vote in person at a polling station.
  - (j) There are various changes in the regulation of political parties.
  - (k) The Electoral Commission is charged with evaluating the performance of local authorities in relation to electoral services.

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## **7.7. Financial Implications**

**7.4.7.1** The accounts are yet to be audited but it is anticipated that due to the promised Government grant towards the cost of the electronic count pilot the net cost of the City Council elections will be approximately £260,000 against an original budget estimate of £340,000,

## **8. Legal and Staffing Implications**

8.1 Not applicable.

## **9. Ward Member Consultation**

**9.1.49.1** The report is being sent to all councillors to provide an opportunity for them to comment in particular on the administration of the City Council elections.

If you have any queries about this report or wish to inspect one of the background papers please contact Nigel Tonkin on  
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## **Background Papers**

Electoral Commission "Electoral Pilot Scheme Evaluation – Westminster City Council (August 2006)" published on Westminster's website:  
<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/pilotsmay2006.cfm>

[Committees\General Purposes\Reports\2006\Ctee Rpt Re Electoral Issues 31 Oct 2006](#)

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APPENDIX "A"

ELECTION QUESTIONNAIRE

		2006 %	2002 %
1. Did you receive a poll card?			
	Yes	85	86
	No	10	5
	Can't remember	5	
2. Did you find the map and voter's guide useful? (In 2002 there was only a map and no guide)			
	Yes	75	59
	No	11	10
	Can't remember	13	31
3. Did you vote?			
	Yes	68	70
	No	32	30
4. If you didn't vote what prevented you from voting?			
	Couldn't get there	30	24
	No interest	19	19
	Insufficient Information	9	13
	Difficult procedure	1	3
	Other	41	42
5. If you didn't vote, would you have been more likely to vote If you had been able to vote?			
	Internet	27	22
	By post or proxy	25	32
	Telephone	14 )	
	Mobile Phone	14 )	23
	Another Day	7	7
	Weekend	13	15
6. If you voted in person did you have any problems finding your polling station?			
	Yes	2	10
	No	98	90

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7. Did you have any problems gaining physical access to the polling station?

Yes	2	4
No	98	95
Can't remember	-	1

8. Were the staff at the polling station?

Helpful	42	44
Polite	36	41
Knowledgeable	21	13
Other	1	2

9. If you used Westminster's website to find out more information is there anything else you would have wished to see included?

Yes	8	N/A
No	92	N/A

10. How satisfied are you with Westminster's Electoral Services?

Very satisfied	37	37
Satisfied	43	48
Neither	17	12
Dissatisfied	2	2
Very dissatisfied	1	1

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