

Background papers



Electoral Matters Committee

Tue 21 Oct
2025
6.30 pm

Oakenshaw Community
Centre, Castleditch Lane
Redditch, B98 7YB

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Electoral Matters

Tuesday, 21st October, 2025

6.30 pm

Oakenshaw Community Centre

Agenda

Membership:

Cllrs:	William Boyd (Chair)	Sid Khan
	James Fardoe	Brandon Clayton
	(Vice-Chair)	Sachin Mathur
	Matthew Dormer	

5. Electoral Pilot for May 2026 Elections (Pages 5 - 20)

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Electoral Modernisation

Prospectus

Flexible Voting Pilots 2026

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The way we vote in a polling station has changed little since the Ballot Act 1872. As society becomes increasingly digital and expectations for convenience rise, existing processes are often at odds with people's expectations of modern public services and in conflict with how some Returning Officers want to provide access to elections.
- 1.2 In its manifesto, the Government committed to encouraging greater participation in our democracy. Modernising the voting experience is a key to achieving that goal. To support this, the Government is exploring ways to make voting in person more efficient, more convenient, and better aligned with the expectations of today's electors.
- 1.3 As part of this work, we are looking to partner with local authorities to pilot a range of flexible voting options at the local elections in May 2026 and 2027.
- 1.4 We are now inviting formal applications from local authorities in England to pilot at local elections in May 2026. We will review applications from any local authorities in England with scheduled elections in May 2026.
- 1.5 In addition, we are planning further pilots to take place at scheduled polls in May 2027. We will invite expressions of interest and formal applications next year to pilot at the May 2027 elections and in the meantime, we welcome any engagement from local authorities with an interest in piloting in 2027.
- 1.6 If you would like to apply to pilot, we are inviting formal applications by **5pm on 15 September 2025**. Details of how to make a formal application are set out in this prospectus. If you have any questions or would like a discussion on piloting prior to submitting a formal application, please get in touch.

PILOT OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 The flexible voting pilot schemes are designed to explore innovative approaches to voting that better reflect the needs and expectations of today's electorate. These pilots aim to modernise the voting experience by introducing greater flexibility, improving accessibility and enhancing voter satisfaction while safeguarding the integrity, security and transparency of the democratic process.
- 2.2 We are inviting local authorities to trial various piloting options as set out in detail in section 3. There is also scope for local authorities to propose alternative options for pilots tailored to the needs of their electorate. However, we will not accept proposals for online or electronic voting.
- 2.3 The overarching objectives of these pilots are to:
- **improve voter convenience and satisfaction;**
 - **advance accessibility and inclusive participation; and**
 - **assess feasibility and deliver cost-effective, resilient and secure voting.**
- 2.4 To improve voter convenience and satisfaction, the pilots will test flexible voting options such as voting hubs, early voting, voting from any polling station and mobile voting. These options are intended to make voting more accessible in terms of time and location, helping electors participate in a way that fits more easily into their lives. By offering greater choice and convenience, the pilots aim to support a more positive voting experience and encourage repeat engagement.
- 2.5 To advance accessibility and inclusive participation, the pilots will explore how flexible voting methods can better support electors who may face barriers to participation, such as disabled voters, those in remote areas, and communities that are less likely to engage. Accessibility will be considered throughout the development of pilot models and the evaluation.
- 2.6 To assess feasibility and resilience, the pilots will examine the operational, financial, and technological implications of delivering new flexible voting methods. This includes analysing cost and resource requirements, identifying risks and dependencies, and exploring the impact on the overall resilience of electoral delivery. Security, transparency, and reliability will be central to every model tested, with a view to understanding how scalable and sustainable these innovations could be in practice.

PILOT DELIVERY

Policy Implementation

- 3.1 Local authorities selected to pilot will be expected to develop and deliver a clear, practical strategy for delivery of their pilot. This includes ensuring electors are well-informed about any changes to the voting process and how to participate. Authorities should also consider how the pilot fits within their broader electoral delivery plans and ensure that any changes are integrated smoothly into existing processes. Support will be available from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Electoral Commission throughout the planning and delivery phases. While MHCLG may engage with suppliers to support the overall delivery of the pilots, it is important to note that local authorities will retain full responsibility for managing supplier relationships. This includes holding the contractual arrangements and ensuring effective oversight of supplier activity throughout the pilot.

Flexible Voting Options

- 3.2 The pilots will be supported using technology such as digital registers, and test and evaluate a range of flexible voting methods designed to offer greater convenience and accessibility, while maintaining electoral integrity and resilience. The four core methods we would like to pilot are:
- 1. Voting at any polling station** - Voters could cast their vote at any polling station within the local authority area rather than being restricted to a designated location.
 - 2. Voting Hubs** - Centralised polling stations located in high-footfall areas open on polling day in addition to regular polling stations.
 - 3. Mobile polling stations** - Mobile units or temporary setups, such as a Presiding Officer with a polling booth and ballot box, that travel to different locations, potentially including care homes, universities, or community centres. These may operate on polling day or in the days leading up to it.
 - 4. Early in-person voting** - Polling stations or hubs open ahead of polling day, with the option of including the weekend, offering flexibility to accommodate electors who may not be able to vote on polling day.
- 3.3 We are open to considering alternative models and digital improvements where local authorities can demonstrate clear rationale and alignment with the pilot objectives. Any such proposals will be subject to further discussion and approval.

Funding

- 3.4 Funding for the additional costs of piloting will be provided by MHCLG. Where changes to processes result in savings, these should be used to offset additional costs to ensure value for money. Authorities will be expected to manage resources effectively and demonstrate financial accountability throughout the pilot period.

APPLICATION PROCESS

- 4.1 We are now inviting formal applications from local authorities in England with scheduled elections in May 2026 to participate in the flexible voting pilots. Applications should be submitted by **5pm on 15 September 2025**

Formal Applications

- 4.2 Formal applications must include:
- a clear outline of the proposed pilot model(s);
 - confirmation of support from the Council or the Chief Executive in line with how the local authority usually makes its decisions and exercises its functions;
 - a commitment to meeting the delivery and evaluation requirements set out in paragraph 5.4 of the next section; and
 - any existing or planned arrangements with suppliers to support the delivery of the pilots.
- 4.3 Formal applications will be reviewed and agreed by MHCLG and representatives from the Electoral Commission. Final approval will rest with the Minister with responsibility for elections, who is obliged by law to consider any application from a local authority under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000. The Minister will need to be satisfied that applicants meet the criteria outlined in section 5 of this prospectus.
- 4.4 MHCLG, with support from the Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators, will work closely with successful authorities to refine delivery plans and support implementation. We are also happy to share learning from previous pilots to help shape proposals.

CRITERIA FOR PILOTING AUTHORITIES

- 5.1 We are looking to work with local authorities that reflect a diverse mix of electoral contexts. This includes variation in geography, population size, and socio-economic and demographic characteristics—such as metropolitan, rural, and urban areas.
- 5.2 Authorities do not need to have elections scheduled in both 2026 and 2027 to be eligible. While at present we are inviting formal applications to pilot at scheduled polls in May 2026, we are open to discussing opportunities for further piloting beyond May 2026, including at subsequent scheduled polls. Any future activity would be shaped by learning from the initial pilots and subject to further agreement.
- 5.3 We are aware that some authorities may be undergoing or preparing for Local Government Re-organisation (LGR). If your local authority is affected, we encourage you to get in touch to discuss your electoral cycle and whether it will be possible to pilot at the May 2026 elections. Participation in the pilots will depend on the specific circumstances and legal considerations in each case.
- 5.4 Authorities submitting a formal application for May 2026 should be able to demonstrate that they have:
 - local elections scheduled for May 2026;
 - an understanding of the Government's objectives for the project and how the pilot fits with these objectives;
 - feasibility to deliver the pilot within the available time frame;
 - effective planning management arrangements with sufficient resources and capacity in the local authority to deliver the pilot, including availability of staff after the election to contribute to the evaluation process;
 - appropriate management of any service suppliers involved;
 - contingency planning to protect the security and integrity of the election;
 - a clear and comprehensive communications plan covering all stakeholders;
 - full support for the Electoral Commission's evaluation process;
 - a clear means of testing the impact of the innovation and capturing learning;
 - a proposed model that is at least as secure as conventional electoral practices; and
 - considered how the pilot will maintain public confidence in the electoral process, with key risks identified and managed.
- 5.5 Authorities are encouraged to contact MHCLG if they have questions about eligibility or delivery expectations. We are committed to working collaboratively with pilot areas to ensure successful implementation and meaningful evaluation.

PILOT LEGISLATION

Statutory Orders

- 6.1 Once pilot applications have been approved, a Statutory Order must be made for each participating local authority. These Orders modify the existing legislation to permit the specific change being piloted and must reflect the exact nature of the innovation for the pilot to be legally compliant.
- 6.2 The preparation of these Orders is a detailed and time-consuming process, requiring close collaboration between local authorities and MHCLG officials. Local authorities will be expected to fully contribute toward the development of the Statutory Order to be prepared by MHCLG.
- 6.3 Failure to prepare an Order in good time, which includes providing sufficient time for the Electoral Commission to carry out their statutory consideration of draft Orders, would mean that a pilot scheme cannot proceed.
- 6.4 It is intended that the Statutory Orders will be in place and signed by January 2026.

Evaluation

- 6.5 MHCLG is committed to a comprehensive evaluation of these pilots. This will be developed in collaboration with participating authorities and informed by the specific models being tested. Further details on our evaluation approach and expectations will be shared with participating authorities.
- 6.6 In addition, the Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate every electoral pilot scheme under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000. The Commission will publish its evaluation framework once pilot applications have been approved and this may include additional criteria beyond those set out in the legislation.
- 6.7 The Commission will send evaluation reports on the pilot schemes to the Minister with responsibility for elections and the relevant local authority. The Commission may also produce an overarching report reviewing the collective impact of the pilot schemes, identifying lessons for future pilot schemes.
- 6.8 To support effective evaluation, participating authorities and their suppliers will be required to provide the Commission with access to:
 - relevant data and information, including current and historic turnout data, project information, and background information;
 - cost data to allow an assessment of value for money;
 - key project personnel; and

- polling stations and the count, where appropriate.
- 6.9 The Commission recognises that evaluation is a significant undertaking and will work closely with pilot authorities to manage this process.
- 6.10 Organisations acting on behalf of the Commission and/or MHCLG may make some information requests of pilot authorities. It is likely that the Commission and/or MHCLG will undertake or contract others to undertake:
- an assessment of the accessibility of pilot schemes;
 - a review of the operation of any technical components of pilot schemes;
 - surveys with local authority and polling station staff; and
 - public opinion research.

PROVISIONAL TIMETABLE

2025	
15 September	Deadline for formal applications from local authorities
September – October	Discussions with approved pilot areas Development of pilot plans and research criteria
October – December	Drafting of Statutory Orders Statutory consultation with the Electoral Commission on Draft Orders Ongoing development of pilot plans and research criteria
2026	
January	Minister signs Orders
January - March	Finalisation of delivery plans Operational readiness checks
May	Delivery of pilot schemes at scheduled local elections
May - July	Data collection and evaluation activities Submission of evaluation materials to the Electoral Commission
August	Finalisation of individual and overarching evaluation reports

THE ROLE OF PILOTS

Why Pilot

- 7.1 The Representation of the People Act 2000 makes provision for local authorities to submit proposals to pilot innovative electoral administration practices at local government elections.
- 7.2 Pilots provide a number of benefits for improving the way elections are run, including:
 - the ability to test changes and innovations in a real-world environment;
 - the facility for formal evaluation through undertaking testing in a controlled environment; and
 - the ability to ensure effective project management and delivery.
- 7.3 This allows us to make a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of the impact of implementing new practices and determine whether they are successful in delivering the desired outcomes. We can then make an informed decision about which measures should be implemented.
- 7.4 Previous pilots have tested a range of new and innovative solutions and have informed policy making in both local and central government.

Strategic Vision

- 7.5 These flexible voting pilots form part of the Government's broader commitment to a transparent, secure, and inclusive democracy. As expectations of public services evolve, it is essential that electoral processes remain relevant, accessible, and trusted. Through these pilots, we aim to:
 - explore how voting can be made more convenient and inclusive;
 - identify and address barriers to participation, particularly for underrepresented groups;
 - test the operational and technological feasibility of new delivery models; and
 - ensure that any changes uphold the integrity and transparency of the electoral process.
- 7.6 Importantly, these pilots represent the first step in a longer-term strategy to modernise the voting experience. The insights gained will inform future phases of reform, helping to shape a roadmap for wider implementation of successful models. This phased approach ensures that changes are supported by evidence, responsive to local needs, and capable of delivering a more inclusive and future-ready democratic process.

- 7.8 By working in partnership with local authorities, the Government aims to build a stronger evidence base for future reforms and ensure that any changes to the voting process are grounded in real-world experience and robust evaluation.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Legislation

- 8.1 The regulations providing for electoral administration pilots and governing how they operate are set out in the Representation of the People Act 2000, section 10, at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/2/section/10.
- 8.2 The statutory criteria for the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the pilots are also set out in the Representation of the People Act 2000, section 10(6) to (10).

FAQs

Q. What are the flexible voting pilots aiming to achieve?

A. The pilots aim to test flexible voting methods that improve convenience, accessibility, and resilience in electoral delivery. They are designed to explore how innovations like early voting, mobile voting, and voting hubs can better meet the needs of today's electorate while maintaining the integrity of the democratic process.

Q. Can my authority propose a pilot model not listed in the prospectus?

A. Yes. While we have outlined four core options, local authorities may propose alternative models that respond to local needs. Any such proposals must be supported by a clear rationale and must not include online voting or electronic voting machines in polling stations.

Q. Will funding be provided for pilot delivery?

A. Yes. MHCLG will provide funding via grants to cover the additional costs of piloting. Where changes result in savings, these should be used to offset costs to ensure value for money.

Q. What support will be available to pilot authorities?

A. MHCLG, supported by the Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators, will work closely with selected authorities throughout the planning and delivery phases. We will share learning from previous pilots, provide guidance on statutory processes, and support engagement with suppliers and stakeholders.

Q. How will supplier delivery be managed for the pilots?

A. Local authorities participating in the pilots will retain full responsibility for managing supplier relationships. This includes holding contractual arrangements, overseeing supplier activity, and ensuring that services are delivered in line with the pilot objectives. While MHCLG may engage with suppliers to support overall delivery, local authorities must ensure effective governance, clear communication, and robust oversight of any third-party involvement. Authorities should also consider supplier readiness and contingency planning as part of their delivery strategy. We encourage local authorities to engage with suppliers during the application process.

Q. Does my authority need prior experience using technology to manage polling station registers to take part in a pilot?

A. No. We are happy to work with local authorities regardless of their previous experience with technology in polling stations. Whether you have used electronic registers before or are exploring them for the first time, we will provide support to help you develop a suitable pilot model. The aim is to test what works in different contexts, so a mix of experience levels is welcome.

However, it is important to note that local authorities will be responsible for managing any suppliers involved in delivering technical solutions. This includes holding contractual arrangements, overseeing delivery, and ensuring that services meet the pilot's objectives

and standards.

Q. Can authorities undergoing Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) take part in the pilots?

A. Yes, authorities involved in LGR may still be eligible to participate. However, detailed discussions will be needed to understand the electoral cycle and governance arrangements. Participation will depend on the specific circumstances and legal considerations in each case. Authorities affected by LGR are encouraged to contact MHCLG early to explore options.

To note, it is not possible to pilot at shadow local authority elections. There may be challenges piloting in areas where a new combined authority is being formed, so please speak to us directly if this applies to you and you wish to submit a formal application.

Q. Is it possible to run pilots at by-elections?

A. Under current legislation, a local authority must apply to pilot in relation to a specific election. Because by-elections are typically called at short notice, there is unlikely to be sufficient time to complete the formal application process and implement the necessary changes for a pilot scheme. As a result, pilots are only expected to take place at scheduled elections where planning and legislative requirements can be met.

Q. What is required from authorities during the evaluation phase?

A. Authorities will need to provide access to relevant data, cost information, key personnel, and polling stations (where appropriate). They will also be expected to support public opinion research and technical assessments led by the Electoral Commission or its partners.

Q. Will participating in a pilot affect the legal status of the election?

A. No. Statutory Orders will be made for each pilot area to ensure legal compliance. These Orders modify existing legislation to permit the specific innovation being trialled and safeguard the integrity of the election.

Q. Can authorities pilot in 2027 if they are not ready for 2026?

A. Yes. While this prospectus invites applications for May 2026, we are planning further pilots in 2027. Authorities interested in future participation are encouraged to engage with MHCLG early to help shape the next phase of the programme.

Q. Will voters need to do anything differently in pilot areas?

A. Yes, depending on the pilot model. For example, voters may be able to vote at different times or locations than usual. Authorities will be expected to run clear and inclusive communications campaigns to ensure electors understand any changes.

Q. How will the pilots contribute to wider electoral reform?

A. These pilots are the first step in a longer-term strategy to modernise the voting experience. The evidence gathered will inform future reforms and help shape a more inclusive, resilient, and accessible electoral system.