

S O L G M

NZ SOCIETY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS



**REPORT TO
SOLGM ELECTORAL
WORKING PARTY
ON VISIT TO OBSERVE ELECTED
ENGLISH LOCAL ELECTIONS AND
MEETINGS WITH KEY AGENCIES
APRIL/MAY 2008**

Introduction

Three members of the SOLGM Electoral Working Party (Gavin Beattie, Dale Ofoske and Barry Rollo) visited England in April/May 2008 to observe selected local authority elections and meet representatives of key agencies and interested organisations.

The following local authorities, organisations and individuals were visited:

- Sheffield City Council
- Liverpool City Council
- Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
- Greater London Authority
- Electoral Reform Society
- Electoral Commission
- Ministry of Justice
- Rt Hon Bruce George MP
- Association of Electoral Administrators
- Gavin Miller, University of London PHD student.

The visit was a follow-up to an earlier visit by members of the SOLGM Electoral Working Party in 2002 to observe "electoral innovations" being piloted then (postal voting, kiosk voting, text voting, internet voting). The 2008 visit was initiated to establish which, if any, electoral innovations were being used, and why (or why not) these were used (or rejected).

Summary of findings, differences and learnings for New Zealand

The following is a summary of the key findings from our visit:

- all local elections in 2008 (polling day 1 May) used ballot box voting, with limited use of postal voting (by prior elector application);
- three of the four local authorities visited had comparatively simple elections comprising solely an election for one vacancy in each ward (the Greater London Authority election was held on a different basis);
- where postal voting was used, personal identifiers (date of birth and signature) were required from electors and validated before votes were counted;
- all other "electoral innovation" pilots have been halted and will be re-assessed after the 2010 parliamentary election;
- electoral innovations, including postal voting, were not seen as alternatives to booth voting, but as additional options to encourage voter turnout;
- English local elections are conducted largely on a party basis with a few independent candidates;
- there was a distinct absence of election advertising and publicity in the areas we visited;
- a fundamental problem is the electoral roll, which is compiled and maintained by each local authority on a household basis (the "head of the household" nominates those living at the address for enrolment), leading to concerns about the integrity of the roll, including fraudulent enrolments and to questions about an accurate total number of eligible electors;
- a nationwide, standardised individual elector registration system, such as in New Zealand, is being investigated for post-2010 implementation;

- some alleged and actual fraud has damaged both public and political confidence in the electoral process and contributed to a halt on further electoral innovations;
- previous electoral innovations also lacked a clearly thought out strategy and longer-term objectives, and were often implemented with insufficient time for rigorous testing;
- strong reservations/concerns were expressed about both e-counting and e-voting on security and integrity grounds.

There are a number of clear differences in the conduct of English and New Zealand local elections, including:

- the relative simplicity of English local elections in terms of the number of issues for which elections are conducted (although this is not translated into comparatively higher voter turnout);
- all elections (i.e. local, parliamentary and European) are conducted at the local level, concurrently in some years;
- the prevalence of booth voting;
- largely manual counting of votes on election night or the next day and immediate declarations of results;
- one-day booth voting and manual counting contributing to a "sense of event or occasion";
- the prevalence of national political parties in local elections;
- returning officers often being local authority chief executives, resulting in comparative ease of employing senior council staff in election processes;
- the existence of formal staff training and certification programmes;
- formal role for Electoral Commission in the conduct of local elections;
- formal programmes of election innovation pilots, including central government funding.

The following is a summary of what was learned from our visit for the conduct of local elections in New Zealand:

- the value of sound electoral processes in which the public can have confidence, including the electoral roll and the application of technology, for example, processing voting documents twice in New Zealand;
- the desirability of a clear and widely agreed overall direction/strategy on electoral modernisation and the desired outcomes for ongoing innovations to be successful (this raises the question about responsibility for developing such a strategy);
- the need for clear definition and agreement on the elements of an electoral modernisation programme (e.g. the forms of e-voting);
- the need for clearly thought out, well-managed and timely implementation of particular electoral innovations, including identifying suitable pilots, players and timelines;
- the need for agreed success measures for pilots;
- any new methodologies need to be:
 - o well designed
 - o well tested
 - o transparent
 - o robust
 - o secure
 - o certified
 - o cost effective/competitive
 - o risk mitigated;
- the need for political agreement and support for an elections strategy and innovations;

- the need for comprehensive public education to ensure public support and confidence in the integrity of electoral processes;
- the importance of recognising the over-riding aim of increasing voter participation/ removing barriers to participation (generally and for particular groups – disabled, youth, ethnic communities etc).

Sheffield City Council

We met Returning Officer Liz Bashforth and Electoral Services Manager John Tomlinson on 28 April 2008. A small delegation from Perth, Scotland, was also there to observe Sheffield's electoral processes.

Sheffield City has 378,000 electors, with 84 elected members – three members elected from each of the 28 wards. The term of office is four years, with a third of members being elected each year and the fourth year being a lay year. A 30 per cent voter turnout was expected.

The 2008 elections were being conducted primarily by ballot box voting (over one day – 1 May – with voting available from 175 polling stations open from 7am to 10pm). Postal voting was also available by application (taken up by about 20 per cent of electors, or 76,000 electors).

We were able to observe the verification of returned postal ballots, as election day proper had not yet occurred. Verification involves electors' personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) being checked and either accepted or rejected by senior Council officers. (The verification process was legislated in 2006 and requires a minimum of 20 per cent of all returned postal ballots to be verified, although Sheffield had agreed to verify 100 per cent.)

The verification process was undertaken by electronically scanning the return slip and comparing data held electronically. Images that did not comply with the scanning business rules were manually viewed. This was largely contracted out to a private company (Opt2Vote).

With voting closing at 10pm on Thursday 1 May, Sheffield City had decided to count all votes in a centralised location (the Town Hall) from 9am Friday 2 May. We visited the rooms where the count was to occur and talked about the process, including the role of the Electoral Commission. Two Electoral Commission staff were due to observe the count of votes. We formed the view that the Commission's involvement was more "tolerated" than "embraced" and were told that the Commission could be quite critical rather than supportive.

We discussed earlier electoral innovation trials (e-voting – kiosk, text and internet, postal voting etc) and were advised that all pilots of electoral innovation had been stopped by the Electoral Commission on the basis there was a need to re-assess outcomes and develop broader overall objectives and strategies. Consequently, legislation does not currently permit voting methods other than ballot box and postal.

In 2004, all UK Councils used postal voting, which was considered successful in terms of doubling voter turnout.

In 2007, Sheffield undertook a further e-voting pilot (kiosk, telephone, remote internet) where electors were required to pre-register to vote electronically. A total of 14 per cent of electors (53,000) pre-registered, but only 5 per cent (19,000) actually used e-voting.

E-voting was unable to be used after two days before the close of the poll. The system allowed the elector to choose their password (the PIN was generated by Council) which created significant confusion.

We understand from Electoral Commission material following the 2007 pilots that five local authorities (including Sheffield City) piloted a range of e-voting solutions, including remote internet voting, telephone voting and the provision of electronic polling stations enabling a "vote anywhere" environment on polling day.

The Electoral Commission summed up these pilots in August 2007 as follows:

"In broad terms, the remote e-voting elements of the May 2007 pilot schemes proved successful and facilitated voting, although there were some issues concerning accessibility, public understanding of the pre-registration process and, in at least one pilot area, technical problems in relation to telephone voting. Electronic polling stations in Swindon proved more problematic, with many experiencing connectivity and application issues on polling day. However, in common with the e-counting pilots, there was insufficient time available to implement and plan the pilots and the quality assurance and testing was undertaken too late and lacked sufficient depth. The level of implementation and security risk involved was significant and unacceptable. There remain issues with security and transparency of the solutions and the capacity of the local authorities to maintain control over the elections."

Liverpool City Council

Our visit to Liverpool City Council was on 29 April 2008, two days before election day. Our host was Elections Manager David Kidger, a consultant employed by SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives). We also met Returning Officer Colin Hilton, Chief Executive of Liverpool City Council, and Assistant Elections Manager Stephen Barker.

Liverpool City has 324,000 electors. The city is divided into 30 wards, each represented by three councillors. Elections are in thirds, with one seat for each ward becoming vacant annually. Each councillor is elected for four years so there is a lay year during the four-year term when no election is held. As a result, the elections are comparatively simple, having only one vacancy per ward.

The electoral register is updated annually. Between mid-August and 30 November an annual canvass is carried out across the city. An electoral registration form is sent to each address and contains details of electors registered for that address. The form is then used to add electors or change details of any elector and is returned to the Electoral Services unit for updating the register.

The 2008 elections were conducted by ballot box voting, but with postal voting on application. Ballot box voting was conducted over one day (1 May) with voting at 219 polling stations from 7am to 10pm. About 32,000 people registered for postal voting, with a return rate of 65 per cent. Votes were counted on Friday, the day after election day.

The deadline for receipt of postal application forms was 16 April 2008 with ballot papers sent to electors about two weeks before election day. Return postal ballots were progressively processed to verify personal identifiers on the declaration (signature and date of birth) with those details on the application form. Liverpool verified 100 per cent of postal votes received.

Verification was carried out electronically with about 10 per cent rejected on the first run and 5 per cent on the second run. Rejects were then manually reviewed with the final result being 1 per cent rejection. Staff had received training from police experts in handwriting interpretation to assist them in making decisions regarding signature authenticity. Most rejects were because of a lack of any signature.

Liverpool used full postal voting in 2004 (all councils in the northwest region combined for a trial) and voter turnout doubled. They were forced to drop full postal voting because of fraud allegations and turnout has dropped back to about 27 per cent.

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

We met with Returning Officer and Chief Executive Paul Sheehan and Electoral Services Manager Peter Allsop (formerly from New Zealand) on 1 May 2008 (election day).

In addition, we:

- met for a lunchtime briefing of polling inspectors (senior council officers)
- met two visiting representatives from the Electoral Commission
- visited a polling station in the suburb of Palfrey (and observed campaigning)
- attended the count of votes after 10pm on election day.

Walsall Metropolitan Borough has 190,000 electors, with 60 elected members – three members elected from each of the 20 wards. The term of office is four years, with a third of members elected each year, and the fourth year a lay year. A 35-40 per cent voter turnout was expected, but only 29 per cent was achieved.

The 2008 elections were conducted primarily by ballot box voting (over one day – 1 May – with voting from 154 polling stations open from 7am to 10pm). Postal voting (open for 11 days before election day) was also by application (taken up by about 10 per cent of electors, or 19,500 electors – of which about 80 per cent actually voted by post). All postal ballots required personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) which were subsequently checked by electoral staff (about 3-4 per cent of these were rejected with a mismatch of information).

We visited a polling station on election day which was an interesting observation of "democracy in action". There was some election "fanfare", but also a regular Police presence. Electors were assigned a specific polling booth and were required to vote at this booth only (we were unsure why this occurs when any polling booth at a polling place should have been able to assist the elector).

Voting closed at 10pm and we visited the Town Hall where the ballot papers were returned to be counted. There was quite a festive mood as all candidates and their agents (attired in party regalia) were able to attend and closely inspect the counting. Any vote where the voter's intention was unclear could be disputed by candidates and/or their agents.

Once the votes are counted on the night (or next day), the Returning Officer verbally announces the results, which are final, except for any judicial challenge.

The electoral roll is compiled/maintained by the Council and an annual survey is undertaken in which the "head of the household" is required to nominate those electors residing at the address. This method of roll compilation/maintenance is universal in the UK, but does cause concern that it can be abused (there has been evidence of some fraudulent enrolment). We understand that both the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Justice have recommended introducing individual elector registration after the 2010 parliamentary elections.

Greater London Authority

On Friday 2 May (the day after election day) we observed vote counting at the Olympia Centre, one of three large counting locations in London. On Friday 9 May we met Deputy Returning Officer John Bennett, Operations Manager Keith Hathaway and Communications Manager Matt Bright, all of the Greater London Authority (GLA).

The GLA elections are held to elect the Mayor and 25 Assembly members as follows:

- the Mayor elected at large
- 14 constituency members, each representing a regional constituency ranging from 330,000 to 500,000 electors
- 11 additional London-wide members.

The GLA area has a population of 7.2 million, 3.2 million households and 5.5 million electors. An estimated 10-20 per cent of electors remain unregistered. Elector turnout for the 2008 elections was very high at 45 per cent, with about 800,000 electors (14.5 per cent) registering for postal voting and 70 per cent actually posting in their vote. All postal declarations were verified.

The elections are run by the 33 constituent councils who print, issue and receive the voting documents. The voting documents are passed on to the GLA for counting at the three counting locations – at Alexandra Palace, Olympia and ExCel. There are more than 4000 polling stations and 12,000 staff.

A candidate booklet is also required to be posted to electors by the GLA. This is an A5 booklet and each candidate pays £10,000 for a double-page spread. Cost of printing is £550,000 (10p each) and distribution by Royal Mail costs £850,000 (15½ p each). The GLA is considering not making any charge on candidates in the future because it is "not worthwhile". The GLA also spent £2 million on a voter registration programme, including a website which received 2.5 million hits for registration.

The total cost of the election was £20 million, which works out at £3.64 per elector and £8 per elector who voted.

There are three different voting systems and three separate ballot papers are issued to each elector. The election for the Mayor is a supplementary voting system where electors vote for a first and second choice of candidate using two columns and ticks. We were advised that 400,000 voters did not exercise a second choice.

Constituency members (14) are elected under the first-past-the-post system.

The additional London-wide members are elected under the additional member system. Electors vote for a party or independent and the 11 seats are allocated to ensure that the overall distribution of seats reflects the proportion of votes cast for each party or independent.

Entry to the Olympia Centre to observe the count involved going through tight security. First an ID was required and then an electronic body frisk followed by coats and hand luggage checks through an x-ray scanner. Armed police were present throughout the centre.

Counting began at 9am on Friday 2 May (the day after election day) and results were announced at 11.55pm that evening. Each team processed the ballot papers for a specified constituency and operated in a team area; members of each constituency team had a team-coloured t-shirt for easy identification.

All ballot boxes were stored overnight in the security of the counting centre. Boxes were cardboard with rope handles and contained about 2000 ballot papers. Each box was registered in a software programme which recorded the number of ballot papers in the box and also allocated the boxes to a scanner. Papers were scanned and the number of papers counted at the same time. If the count through the scanner was more than three papers different from the record from the polling station, then the box was rescanned and if necessary manually counted. Ballot papers did not have to be sorted (i.e. mayoral, constituency and London-wide), nor did they have to be orientated to the top – this was all sorted by the software.

The counting was contracted to Indra, a Spanish company which provided all the equipment and software. There were a total of 210 scanners and 244 staff. GLA staff numbered 25. Fujitsu technicians were present and serviced scanners on site. The counting software was certified by Deloitte and KPMG.

In the counting process, papers rejected by the software for any reason were considered by the First Adjudicator who could accept only suspect votes. Rejects from the First Adjudicator were then sent to the Chief Returning Officer for a ruling. Adjudication was carried out in public view with images of the ballot paper displayed on a large screen. Candidates and scrutineers often challenged and debated the rulings.

The Chief Returning Officer said the software was excellent but the scanners were letting them down. Paper dust was getting into the scanners and they overheated.. The paper used for the ballot papers was poor quality.

While the counting of votes was carried out at the three count sites the central calculation was at City Hall. Information screens at each counting site tracked the results.

Electoral Reform Society

We met Chief Executive Ken Ritchie, Director of Research Lewis Baston and Katy Wright on 6 May.

Ken Ritchie gave a brief history of the Society which dates back to 1884. Initially the Society was known as the Proportional Representation Society and had the prime objective of promoting the STV voting system. In 1958 the Society changed to its current name, reflecting a broader interest in promoting democracy.

The Society has two subsidiary companies – Electoral Reform Services which assists in the conduct of elections for a wide range of organisations, and Electoral Reform International Services which offers a range of advisory services. It receives significant income from these companies.

We discussed engagement issues, including activities in schools and targeting the right age group in relation to the minimum voting age. Reference was made to the recent establishment by the UK Government of a Youth Citizenship Commission. The Commission's remit is to:

- examine what citizenship means to young people
- consider how to increase young people's participation in politics
- develop citizenship among disadvantaged groups
- consider how active citizenship can be promoted through volunteering and community engagement
- lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

It was noted that turnout for UK parliamentary elections was dropping in line with international trends from turnout of 70+ per cent up to 2000 and dropping to about 60 per cent in 2001 and 2005.

Councillors in UK local authorities are elected for four years. Some local authorities hold elections for all positions every four years and some hold elections on a rotational basis with elections three years out of every four. This means there are local elections most years and sometimes they may be run in conjunction with parliamentary or European elections. European elections are run on a regular five-year cycle and parliamentary elections are held at least every five years but may be called at any time.

We discussed the impact of running local elections in conjunction with parliamentary and European elections, both in terms of different voting systems (the European Parliament is now elected on a closed list PR system, Scotland and Northern Ireland also have different voting systems) and turnout. UK turnout for European elections has ranged from 24 per cent to 38 per cent.

We discussed in more detail the situation in Scotland where in 2007 local authorities were elected using the STV voting system and the Scottish Parliament is elected using a list system similar to New Zealand's MMP.

The Society provided us with its report on the 2007 elections and its conclusions (based on a survey with a 48 per cent response rate) were:

- STV has produced more representative councils
- most votes contributed to the election of a councillor
- parties appear to have adapted well to the new system

- the new system has not disadvantaged women though the opportunities it presented were far from fully grasped by the parties
- voter understanding of the system appears to have been generally good with a relatively low level of spoilt ballot papers.

The main concern at the 2007 elections was the combined ballot paper used for the Scottish Parliament election.

We asked whether the Society had a role in providing election education and publicity material, but were told the Electoral Commission was responsible for this.

We were asked about the decision to use the Meek method of STV in New Zealand and particularly any concerns about a lack of transparency given the need to use computers for counting votes. We explained the established tradition in New Zealand local elections of counting the votes twice and reconciling any differences. This was the basis on which processing systems were independently tested and the STV calculator was certified. This provided the necessary assurance for all interested parties in the integrity of NZSTV processing and counting systems.

In relation to possible initiatives on voting methods, the Society representatives said any activity outside of traditional polling stations could be open to fraud. While they were not opposed to postal voting, they considered that these concerns needed to be addressed before new methods were more widely introduced.

The Society's position was that politics needed to be made more interesting and this would result in an increased level of engagement. Its *raison d'être* was electoral reform rather than trialling of new voting methods.

Rt Hon Bruce George

We met Rt Hon Bruce George, MP for Walsall South, at Westminster on 7 May. Also present were Senior Researcher Simon Kimber and Research Assistant Sarah Baldwin.

This meeting arose as a result of our visit to observe the Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council elections, following which Mr George, as the local MP, said he was interested in meeting us.

Mr George had some interesting insights about observing elections, both the recently adopted process in the UK, and his experiences at a number of elections around the world.

UK Electoral Commission

We met Director Electoral Administration and Boundaries Andrew Scallan, and Electoral Modernisation Manager Tom Hawthorn on 7 May.

The Commission is an independent statutory body set up by the UK Parliament in 2000. The aim of the Commission is integrity and public confidence in the UK's democratic processes.

The role of the Commission is to:

- register political parties
- make sure people understand and follow the rules on party and election finance
- publish details of where parties and candidates get money from and how they spend it
- set standards for running elections and report on how well this is done
- make sure people understand it is important to register to vote, and know how to vote
- make sure boundary arrangements for local government are fair.

Before establishing the Commission, the boundaries function was undertaken by a Local Government Boundaries Commission.

The Electoral Commission does run parliamentary referendums and has conducted one on a regional assembly for North East England.

The Commission, comprising six non-partisan commissioners, is funded by Parliament through the Speaker's Committee.

Its single largest expenditure item is on education. Its focus is on registration and facilitating voting. It jointly funded the "London elects" campaign.

We were interested to learn that no one body is responsible for collating election results across the country and there was reliance on the BBC for results.

The Commission has a statutory duty to report on the administration of elections. It has reported on elections across the UK since 2001, covering a full cycle of elections including two parliamentary general elections. Reports covering the May 2007 elections considered implementing large-scale electoral administration reform following the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

The Commission may make recommendations for changes to electoral law, but it does not have responsibility for the development, enactment or implementation of policy or legislation.

Andrew Scallan said that while the Commission had a primarily administrative role, there was some policy capacity. He said there had been piecemeal evolution on how elections were run in the UK and a clearer overall elections strategy was now needed. The Commission had, however, taken some internal decisions about reporting in certain areas.

Modernisation activities currently being addressed, including appropriate consultation, were focussed on elector registration and performance indicators for elections and referendums.

The Commission has powers to advise and assist local authority returning officers and electoral registration officers (may be the same person and often the local authority chief executive) but has no powers to direct them in the conduct of their duties. Since 2006, the Commission has had powers to set performance standards for elections and electoral registration and to monitor performance against those standards.

We discussed the background and results of the more than 150 electoral pilot schemes that the Commission has evaluated since 2002. Again there was a comment about the lack of a clear overarching plan on desired electoral outcomes and how to get there. Pilots can involve:

- changes to when, where and how voting at local elections can take place (cannot be held at local elections run in conjunction with parliamentary or European elections)
- how the votes cast are to be counted
- candidates sending election communications free of postal charges.

The limiting of pilots to local elections only, results in what was described as “the impact of a quirk of chronology” as to when they can actually be held.

The Commission is required to evaluate pilot schemes including whether the pilot scheme:

- helped to make voting or counting easier
- helped to improve turnout
- helped to facilitate voting
- led to a reduction or increase in electoral fraud
- led to a reduction or increase in the cost of elections.

Since 2000 the Government has encouraged English local authorities to undertake pilots that test new methods of voting and voting arrangements which, if successful, might be adopted more widely. To date there have been six separate rounds of electoral pilot schemes. There have also been a number of pilots at local by-elections to fill casual vacancies (almost exclusively all-postal voting pilots).

Andrew Scallan noted a recommendation in 2003, following initial pilots, to introduce all-postal voting subject to the establishment of an efficient and effective elector registration system. Then in 2004 major pilots of all-postal voting were conducted in four European parliamentary regions in England. There were major problems with these pilots in certain areas, including with postal services resulting in some significant delays, and also fraud issues. The overall outcome was described as a “disaster”. A very partisan political debate followed, with one piece of legislation, addressing related issues, moving between the House of Commons and House of Lords 12 times.

In 2006 some postal vote signature checking pilots were conducted.

We discussed the difficulties with postal voting in England, including comparative New Zealand experiences, and there was a consensus that the present household registration system was a fundamental problem. While actual fraud cases were rare, the potential for this was real. Until individual registration was introduced, public perceptions and concerns would prevent widespread use of postal voting.

In August 2007 the Commission reported on its findings from the most recent pilots i.e. the May 2007 elections. Its findings are set out in the Appendix.

The conclusion of the Commission was that the Government needed to develop a robust, publicly available electoral modernisation strategy that had been subject to extensive consultation, including the purpose of modernisation. (We note the Government's response did not accept all the Commission's recommendations.)

The Commission representatives said they could not see a way forward on modernisation until there was agreement on the big issues, including election structures and elector registration. These issues needed to be on the Government's policy agenda and the positions of all parties identified.

We discussed some of the mechanics of individual elector registration, including the need for transition from the current household system. The system was currently a local function but

it was acknowledged that there needed to be a national register of some sort. Concerns to be addressed in the transition included access to registration and the impact on numbers of registered electors. This was a particular concern to the political parties.

We then discussed experiences from the 2007 Scottish elections where local council elections were conducted using STV in conjunction with the Scottish Parliament election. Running elections together was designed to achieve maximum possible turnout. Electronic counting was also used.

We were told that there was a perception of chaos with these elections, particularly relating to the electronic counting solution. But this perception was worse than the reality. Problems arose from a combined voting document for the Scottish Parliament elections for both the constituency vote and the party vote. Given some differences in the number of candidates, this resulted in slightly different formats which caused confusion and a large number of unused documents. The concerns resulted in an independent inquiry being conducted (the Gould report) which produced a comprehensive series of recommendations.

We also briefly discussed the Greater London Authority elections, which used electronic counting for the first time in 2004 and again in 2008, and management responsibilities for these elections.

Ministry of Justice

We met Head of Electoral Strategy Paul Docker, Head of Electoral Modernisation Branch David Canning, and E-voting and E-counting Consultant Stuart Harrington, on 8 May.

We discussed a range of electoral issues, including polling day and the polling period, electoral systems, including instructions to voters and format of voting documents, and elector registration.

On the last issue we observed how we saw the present household registration system as a fundamental problem that needed to be addressed before significant change could occur on electoral modernisation issues. This was acknowledged and we were asked in some detail about New Zealand's electoral enrolment process.

We were told that the issue about electoral fraud only arose in respect of local elections as it would be difficult to organise in respect of nation-wide parliamentary elections. Electoral fraud, such as registration of "ghost" voters was not seen as a widespread problem, despite some high-profile court cases in Birmingham and Slough. Concerns about reforms in this area related to any closing down of elector access to the roll.

Paul Docker outlined the functions of the Ministry covering policy and legislation responsibilities, and also registration and engagement activities. These functions had been the responsibility of other agencies in the past and were distinct from the responsibilities of the Department of Communities and Local Government, which included the structure of local government and matters such as parish polls.

The Ministry administers the recently enacted Electoral Administration Act 2006. It is responsible for UK-wide elections and referendums and local government elections in England and Wales.

The Ministry has an active electoral modernisation programme aimed at providing electors with choice in the way they exercise their vote. It develops policies and processes aimed at making elections more accessible, improving participation, enhancing security, and improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of elections.

Paul Docker also outlined recent history in terms of declining voter turnout since 2000, the initiation of electoral pilot schemes and Electoral Commission recommendations on particular initiatives, including all-postal voting. He said the instances where fraud had occurred were not in the pilot areas. He also outlined the experiences from e-voting pilots, including that the remote e-voting pilots (i.e. via the internet) had been more successful than e-voting booths which had provided no paper trail.

In 2006 some initiatives to provide facilities for disabled voters were piloted, but these did not attract a large uptake.

We discussed the continuum between security in voting processes at one end and accessibility for electors at the other, and the challenge of finding the appropriate balance between the two. Public trust was seen as the biggest issue in any widespread introduction of e-voting. Reference was made to particular influences such as the media and the example of The Times newspaper which was seen to be very strongly opposed to postal voting. Some interests were also opposed to e-voting.

The comment was made that no change in electoral policy was seen as likely unless it could be shown to be essential for achieving desired outcomes.

We discussed the role of the Ministry in particular areas, including in relation to definition of IT policy requirements, procurement matters such as accrediting of IT suppliers, and the provision of guidance to local authorities and returning officers. Influences in these areas included European procurement rules which needed to be complied with.

The experience with e-voting showed greater than 20 per cent take-up by electors and more than 50 per cent voted of those who had pre-registered. Reference was made to the role of providers such as On-line Voting Services Ltd.

Finally we discussed the role of the Ministry in promoting democratic engagement. We were advised that the Ministry had a role in specific areas, for example providing publicity relating to the Youth Parliament.

Association of Electoral Administrators

We met Chief Executive John Turner and Training Manager John Owen on 6 May.

The main role of the Association is to provide/facilitate education and training to electoral officials in the UK. Established 20 years ago, the Association has 1500 members representing all UK local authorities and aims to achieve a "qualified electoral official" in every authority.

We were advised that there are three levels of electoral education offered:

1. Foundation Course: being five one-day courses spread over one year with a focus on electoral law.
2. Certificate Course (AEA Certificate): being four written assignments and two written examinations with a focus on electoral systems.
3. Diploma Course (AEA Diploma): being a 10,000 word dissertation spread over two years followed by two examinations, with a focus on electoral management.

Membership of the Association and qualifications for returning officers are voluntary. The Association holds quarterly regional meetings and an annual conference attended by about 400 members.

In addition, the Association offers an electoral consultancy service to local authorities wishing to contract this out.

Gavin Miller, University of London

We met Gavin Miller from the University of London. Gavin is doing a thesis for his PhD on a comparison of the role of elector polls in England and New Zealand. We gave him some contact details for electoral officers that we knew had conducted polls recently.

APPENDIX

Findings of Electoral Commission from 2007 election pilots

In August 2007 the Electoral Commission reported its findings from the May 2007 election pilots. These are summarised as follows:

1. advance voting and signing for voting papers:
 - for the most part, pilots were managed and implemented successfully
 - there was little in the way of new learnings
 - given this, the Commission recommended no further piloting of these innovations
 - the Commission recommended that, as part of its wider modernisation strategy, the Government should come to a decision on whether advance voting should be mandatory, optional or discontinued
 - the Commission questioned the overall deterrent value of requiring electors to sign for ballot papers unless provisions are linked to a system of individual registration
2. electronic counting:
 - mixed results were achieved with successful piloting in some areas although the speed of the count was slower than anticipated, but significant problems in some areas led to the abandoning of electronic counting
 - previous evaluations by the Commission concluded electronic counting had the potential to increase efficiency and accuracy of the count but experiences of 2007 highlighted the need for proper implementation (i.e. insufficient time to plan and implement pilots, quality assurance and testing too late and of insufficient depth, concerns about transparency of solutions deployed undermining stakeholder confidence, concerns about ability of returning officers and suppliers to cope with the project management involved)
 - piloting was seen to have largely achieved its objective with circumstances and practices leading to successful implementation already learned (although many were not applied in this round)
 - the Commission questions the value of further small-scale pilots and does not recommend further implementation of pilots
3. electronic voting (including remote e-voting, telephone voting, electronic polling stations):
 - remote e-voting broadly successful although some concerns about accessibility, public understanding of pre-registration process and technical problems re telephone voting
 - electronic voting stations were more problematic
 - insufficient time was available to plan and implement pilots and quality assurance and testing was undertaken too late and with insufficient depth, the level of implementation and security risk involved was significant and unacceptable
 - the Commission recommends no further e-voting be undertaken until the following elements are in place:
 - a comprehensive electoral modernisation strategy outlining how transparency, public trust and cost effectiveness can be achieved
 - a central process is implemented to ensure sufficiently secure and transparent solutions that have been tested and approved can be selected by local authorities
 - sufficient time is allocated for planning pilots
 - individual elector registration

4. wider issues:

- a major factor influencing success or otherwise of pilots was the amount of time available for planning and implementation
- need for development of a procurement framework of qualified suppliers local authorities can use with confidence
- need for development, quality assurance, testing, accreditation and certification of e-voting and e-counting solutions before testing in a live environment
- need for best practice guidance for returning officers or collaboration of local authorities and suppliers in development of e-voting and e-counting solutions designed for UK elections.