

Review of ballot paper design

In our report on the 2001 general election we indicated that the design of ballot papers was an issue that the Commission wished to review including whether there is any case for (and the practicalities of introducing) positive abstention. This review considers whether the Commission should make recommendations to Government for legislative change to improve the current arrangements for ballot paper design. It also considers if it would be helpful or necessary for the Commission to introduce additional guidance to improve the design of ballot papers. The aim of the review is to make ballot papers more user-friendly for the voter and ease the task of counting undertaken by electoral administrators.

The ballot paper is one of the key components in the electoral process; its design and accompanying guidance is crucial to the success of elections. The review looks at all UK ballot papers used in statutory elections, except parish councils and referendums and the consultation paper identifies a range of strategic and detailed points relating to ballot papers on which the Commission is seeking comment.

The Consultation paper seeks views by 4 March on the following:

Alphabetic listing

- Is there evidence that voting behaviour is influenced by the position of the candidate's name on the ballot paper?
- Issues on which the Commission would need to produce guidance if a system involving rotation of candidates' names on the ballot paper was introduced
- If rotation was introduced the approach to be adopted when announcing results?

Numbers on ballot papers

- Is there evidence that voting behaviour is influenced by the use of numbers to the left of the candidates' name on the ballot paper? Should this be permitted?

Use of emblems

- Are the current rules relating to the use of emblems discriminatory? What changes, if any, are necessary?

'Commonly known as'

- The Commission invites comment on its proposal to recommend a provision allowing candidates to omit the use of their official name from the ballot paper in favour of their 'common' name, provided the full official name is provided on the nomination paper?

Election information

- Should ballot papers state for which election they relate to on their front?
- Should they include a statement highlighting the right to vote in secret? Should this warning be included on all ballot papers or only postal votes?
- Should ballot papers include a description of the body for which the election is taking place or as an alternative include a crest or logo?

Explanatory notes

- Should there be more information on the ballot to explain how to vote? Could this be achieved by improved information in the polling station rather than inclusion on the ballot paper?
- Should information on how votes are counted be provided either on the ballot paper or in the polling station?

Information about parties and candidates

- Should information relating to the candidates and parties standing at an election be available to the voter in the polling station or in an anteroom?

Production of ballot papers other than in English and Welsh

- Should ballot papers be produced in languages other than English and Welsh?
- If yes, should a threshold be introduced so that if the ethnic minority population in an electoral area exceeded it, then ballot papers would be produced in that language? What threshold is appropriate?
- Are there consequences for the design of ballot papers if they were produced in other languages and is guidance necessary?

Size, colour and printing of ballot papers

- Should the size of the ballots be increased generally and the use of colours other than white considered?
- What are the implications of such a move from the perspective of being user friendly to the voter, and in terms of cost and time during the administration of an election?

Photographs

- Should photographs of candidates be included on the ballot paper?
- What size, colour and style of photographs should be permissible?
- Who should verify the photograph is a true likeness?
- Is there any potential equality, cultural or religious discrimination issues linked to the use of photographs on ballot papers that the Commission should consider?

Multi-ballot papers

- Should multi-ballot papers be introduced where elections to more than one office or institution take place on the same day and the elector would normally be given more than one ballot paper?

Information currently included

- Is there any information contained on ballot papers that could or should be removed?

Serial numbers

- Should the use of serial numbers on ballot papers be discontinued?
- Should the use of serial numbers on ballot papers be replaced with an alternative means of tracing, perhaps a barcode?
- If the use of serial numbers continues, is there merit in an educational initiative to explain why serial numbers are used to assist in combating personation?

Official marks

- The Commission invites comment on its proposed introduction of some form of alternative to the current official mark in order to eradicate disenfranchisement of voters through human error in the polling station. If introduced, what should replace the current official mark, if anything?

Landscape or portrait

- Is it practical to impose a standard style for all ballot papers?

Proofing of ballot papers

- Should candidates or agents be given an opportunity to proof a copy of the ballot paper prior to printing?

Means of making a mark

- Should an alternative means of marking the voters preference other than the current indelible pencil be considered, and if so, what?
- If concerns exist amongst the electorate should an educational programme address them?

Adjudication

- Should the Commission develop guidance on the adjudication of ballot papers or is this a matter best left to Returning Officers' judgement?

Electronic voting and counting

- Can the design of ballot papers for the use in e-voting or counting be driven by the same factors as those affecting design of traditional paper ballots?
- What should be included in any proposed Commission guidelines on 'candidate selection' web pages?

Positive abstention

- Do you support the introduction of a system of positive abstention? Why?
- If positive abstention were introduced, what approach would you favour for deciding the final outcome of the ballot?

Candidates' names on closed lists

- Should the names of candidates on lists be included on the ballot paper?
- Is there any evidence that voting behaviour is influenced by the inclusion of names on the list ballot paper?

Financial implications

- Comments and information relating to the likely costs of the possible changes discussed in the consultation paper are requested.

Timescale implications

- Comments relating to the implications for the electoral timetable of the ideas in the consultation paper are requested.

Further information

The full paper is available on The Electoral Commission's website www.electoralcommission.org.uk or in hard copy from the Commission's offices.