



Developing performance indicators for elections and referendums – response to the Electoral Commission

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1. Introduction

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the publication of the Electoral Commission's consultation document on the draft set of performance indicators for the administration of elections and referendums.
2. As the consultation document points out, section 67 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA) gives the Commission new powers to set and monitor performance standards for electoral services, as well as to collect information on costs.
3. As a technology company with a long track record in the public sector, we strongly believe that it is our corporate responsibility to contribute to broader debates around public policy to promote community justice and well-being. Our objective is for stronger and safer communities, and a society in which rights and responsibilities are recognised by governments, companies and individuals. Our services support that vision.
4. Fundamental to well-being is a modern, effective and efficient electoral system which strengthens and enhances democratic practice and which ensures that all of us – including those most disadvantaged in our communities – have their voice heard.
5. Our response draws on over 20 years of experience of working with electoral administration officers at a local level, as well as our understanding of the national and local challenges that exist in creating a modern electoral system.
6. Northgate is committed to the strengthening and enhancement of the democratic process. In particular, we must address the needs of those most disadvantaged in our communities who may often not participate in the electoral process. We need a system that is not only fit for purpose but also assists in addressing the democratic malaise implied by reduced levels of public participation in the electoral process, and one which delivers an effective performance standards framework for elections and referendums by 2009, the year of the European parliamentary elections.
7. Before responding to the particular issues raised by the consultation document, we first make some general comments which we believe that an effective framework must address. We then comment only upon those performance indicators where we believe we have relevant knowledge and skills or an evidence-base from which to comment.

2. Developing an effective performance standards framework

Performance partnerships

8. As one of the larger suppliers in the industry, Northgate believes that there are considerable challenges facing all those who work within the electoral community to drive through continuous improvement in performance and ensure that the system is fit for purpose for a modern democracy.
9. We have to ensure that the essential modernisation of the electoral system takes place within the context of adopting the most effective and efficient voting services for citizens and other stakeholders at a time when resources may be constrained, particularly for some of the smaller authorities when conducting local elections.
10. If performance standards are to be raised across the board, there is a need for a high level strategic commitment to running modern elections within authorities as well as a reformulation of the way that local authorities work with the private sector to address strategic issues, so that the private and public sector can work incrementally towards the modernisation of our democratic system.
11. We believe that it is essential that a new partnership approach is adopted between the public and the private sector which can harness the talents and skills of the private sector to enhance the capacity and skills of those working within the electoral community to strengthen democratic processes throughout the UK.
12. This approach must move beyond discussion on day to day hardware and software needs and involve the public and private sector in strategic discussions around leadership, project management and business process development, and how technology can serve more effectively the business of managing elections.
13. Whilst we welcome the establishment of a supplier group under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice as a means of generating discussion on day to day technology issues, we are keen to offer our support for a forum or initiatives where strategic discussions could take place with local authorities and government, with a view to establishing an incremental partnership approach to modernisation and performance improvement and using business process engineering to drive technological change and improve performance standards.
14. We believe that the Electoral Commission is in an ideal position to lead and develop such a strategic forum in the context of its work to raise performance standards both at a national level and through its regional offices. We would welcome further discussions around this issue, particularly as it relates to the issue of resources, outlined below, and how support can best be utilised harnessing the power of third parties.

Balancing national standards against local needs

15. There is clearly a need to use national standards to drive through local improvement. However, any system that is established, as government acknowledges, must be consistent with the principles of a limited, outcome-focused and less burdensome set of measures which underpin the national indicator set for local government.¹
16. We readily accept that the current system is data rich and information poor, and that using information to drive through performance improvement is critical to success. However, there can be little doubt that the introduction of performance indicators will involve additional local resources in measuring and collecting the required data and, if the system is to be effective, that this issue must be acknowledged and addressed. The consultation document contains thirteen indicators with a little less than fifty individual measures.
17. Our concern is that larger authorities with more resources may find it easier to fulfil the proposed criteria than smaller authorities with less, and that this may increase local and regional disparities in performance rather than driving through improvements on a national basis. This, in turn, may impact on “hard to reach groups” who have more difficulty in accessing the democratic system, and lead to increasing inequality in the democratic process.
18. We therefore believe that it is essential that the development of the performance framework should be accompanied by a range of support tools that can be utilised by local authorities to improve performance at the same time as the introduction of the measurement exercise. Without this, there is a danger that smaller local authorities, in particular, may view the exercise as an additional burden which detracts rather than adds to performance standards at election time.
19. The Electoral Commission has recognised that support is important but it is our opinion that more emphasis must be placed on identifying best practice in skills transfer, the management of resources and enhancing both capacity and capability within local authorities of all sizes and on using third party support to enable this to happen.
20. The procurement of services from third party suppliers within the electoral administration system is fragmented, arguably with too many variables at a local level caused by local customisation of electoral administration services and the diverse technology systems used by local authorities.

Time for change

21. It is essential that enough time is given to local authorities to enable them to put in place the necessary processes for the introduction of performance indicators. There must be a clear timetable with roles and responsibilities clearly outlined.

¹ Government response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's eleventh report, *Review of the Electoral Commission*, November 2007

22. The consultation document makes clear on page 2 that it will introduce the first data collection of indicators at the scheduled local elections in England and Wales in May 2008 and that the commission will, following consultation, publish the performance indicators in Spring 2008. However, on page 3 it states that it will publish the indicators “early in 2008”. A further consultation will follow during Autumn 2008.
23. Given the critical nature of elections to democratic institutions, we recommend that a clear timetable is produced by the Electoral Commission which provides clear dates and enough time for the electoral community to prepare for the introduction of performance indicators in 2009.
24. We also recommend that the performance indicators are published “early in 2008”, as opposed to the Spring. Local authorities should be given more than six full weeks in which to prepare to capture the data and with which to consult with any third parties necessary for the successful completion of data collection.
25. We recommend that following the May 2008 elections the consultation on support required by local authorities referred to in paragraph 1.11 of the document be finalised and that recommendations for additional support be contained within the proposed Autumn consultation document, referred to in paragraph 1.9. Ideally, this would be predicated by informed discussions with third parties (see above, paragraph 12).
26. We further recommend that local authorities are given at least six months time in which to implement the processes, particularly given the fact that for the many authorities who are not holding elections in May 2008, they will not have the opportunity to have a trial run in the context of live elections. This means that the finalised performance indicators should be made available to local authorities by the end of 2008.

Preparing for change

27. Public services have multiple objectives. The factors that make up public value are more complicated than the various bottom lines of private sector organisations. These need to be recognised and managed, rather than avoided. In the past, within public sector contracts the choice between supplier relationship and strategic partnerships tended to leave too much control with one party or the other.
28. It is essential that changes to technology are well-planned, and critical that people are placed at the heart of this change. ‘Virtualising’ public services is far more than a technical change. Only if the relevant change management strategies have been put in place can technology add value to services.
29. Too little thought can be given to considering the impact of new technology on employees, users and members of the public. Prior to new services being introduced, citizens must be consulted, staff should be prepared and genuinely involved, the impact on service development analysed and pre-emptive measures put in place to deal with any new demand.

Proposed performance indicators

Project management – performance indicator 1

30. There is clearly a need to examine the use of project management processes by Returning Officers to support the effective planning and management of elections and referendums. There is little doubt that this data could be collected with ease.
31. Prince 2 methodology is commonly used within our industry, and Northgate is using this methodology in rolling out its new electoral management system for local authorities. However, many of the smaller local authorities involved in electoral administration are unlikely to have such in-house specialisms within their teams, and the introduction of such a methodology may create additional costs for hard-stretched local authorities.
32. Given that the process of electoral administration is similar for all local authorities in terms of the overall legislative framework, Northgate recommends that a model template be drawn up which could be used as part of a performance toolkit for local authorities and would benefit those without in-house expertise. We recommend that this is based on Prince 2 Methodology, but that it is flexible enough to take account of the needs of smaller local authorities and teams.
33. Performance partnerships could also be considered in strengthening the capacity of local authorities to use project management skills and to ensure that electoral administration is effectively and efficiently administered.
34. Making use of innovative business risk models which link performance improvement to fees and which guarantee sustainability through transferring skills and knowledge to the public sector could also assist in the introduction and improvement of performance management processes within individual local authorities or clusters of authorities.

Procurement of services – performance indicator 2

35. Building and developing more effective relationships between the public and private sector in delivering electoral modernisation is essential. Therefore, we welcome the performance indicator which covers procurement of services.
36. However, we believe that the current list of services fails to take account of the widening use of the private sector in electoral administration. Therefore, we recommend that the Returning Officer should provide information on all major contracts for electoral administration services in place. This would then reveal the changing nature of the relationship between the private sector and the public sector in delivering electoral services and assist in identifying descriptions of best practice.
37. Sustainable and responsible procurement is critical to responding to the wider global challenges such as climate change and, in order to assist with promoting these broader global challenges, Northgate recommends that any self-assessment should include analysis of whether the authority had adopted sustainable procurement practices in awarding contracts.

Design and content of communications with electors – performance indicator 3

38. It is essential that the design and content of communications with electors balances quality and consistency with accessibility and intelligibility, along with the efficiency of the system as a whole.
39. We are concerned that this performance indicator fails to assess whether increasing customisation and diversity in the approach and appearance of non-prescribed forms on the part of local authorities has an effect overall on the efficiency of the electoral system. Previous research by the Electoral Commission has shown that over recent years there has been wide variation in the types of forms used by local authorities.²
40. Whilst strong local authority branding is important, particularly in the context of the place-shaping agenda, there is an argument that such diversity may encourage the current fragmentation of suppliers in the elections market thus hindering efficiencies gained from economies of scale.

Postal vote opening processes – performance indicator 5

41. Northgate welcomes this indicator. It also believes that an additional indicator should be given to cover training on checking personal identifiers. This could be included either within the remit of this indicator or within indicator 6.

Recruitment, training and support for polling and counting staff – performance indicator 6

42. It is Northgate's experience that there is within the electoral community differing levels of skills, capabilities and capacity which affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the electoral system as a whole. However, the current indicator only refers to providing information about staffing on polling day.
43. Yet the effectiveness of the operation of polling day relies far more on the nature of long-term staffing, the use of trained staff in the run-up to the election and the ability of election teams to harness the necessary resources to deliver efficient and effective services.
44. It is Northgate's experience that problems on polling day can occur because authorities within smaller districts are multi-tasking within different departments and are not receiving adequate training and support; there are single points of failure where there is a recognised expert but no effective back-up if that expert is not available for some reason; and not enough high-level priority is given to the operational management and risk management processes prior to polling day.
45. We therefore recommend that wider information is contained within this indicator to provide information about the polling team and its resources, training and support through the main

² *Modernising electoral forms*, Electoral Commission, June 2006

stages of the election cycle. We believe that this will help to demonstrate the need for additional support for some of the smaller authorities and will therefore help the Electoral Commission to provide an effective service to support the overall efficiency of the system.

46. We also very much welcome the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) for electoral services and believe that there is much more which could be done to increase awareness of how technology could support the business of electoral registration and administration more effectively, both within this programme and in developing performance standards overall.

Encouraging participation – performance indicator 12

47. We welcome the new duty under s. 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006. At a minimum, encouraging public participation in the electoral process must include increasing electoral registration and turnout and encouraging more people from diverse communities to stand as representatives.
48. Many local authorities are data rich but information poor when it comes to analysis of turn out and targeting particular members within the community through channels of communication most accessible to them.
49. Technology can assist in providing information which can be used to directly encourage increased participation through such methods as identifying and segmenting the electorate and enabling targeted information to be sent to individual voters; highlighting trends of voting and participation broken down by geographical and ward areas; using new forms of communication to encourage broader participation such as email and SMS.
50. Ideally, we would like to see the same techniques that are used for benefits take up to apply to encouraging participation in the democratic process, making use of technology to improve access and accountability of the local democratic process.

Participant satisfaction – performance indicator 13

51. Increasing public satisfaction is critical to rebuilding public trust and encouraging democratic engagement. We welcome the introduction of a new performance indicator which measures satisfaction and citizen feedback. We see this as an essential ingredient for renewing democracy in this country.
52. Election services need to place citizens and key users of the system at the heart of their delivery mechanisms, and these services need to be built around the electorate's needs rather than the needs of organisations. In this way the public can help to shape modern electoral services which foster participation and increased representation.

3. About Northgate

Northgate Information Solutions is a leading provider of innovative services to the public sector and utilities markets. It is committed to high quality public services and understands the public sector. That knowledge is core to its business.

Northgate's task is to enhance public value through the intelligent use of people and technology, and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

In the UK, the company works with four out of five local authorities and every police force. Northgate supports public service transformation through sustainable performance partnerships. Its technology is used in electoral administration systems covering 18 million people; the administration of more than £12 billion of revenues and benefits; to support the national system for reporting police performance; and in the management of over three million local authority and housing association properties worldwide. Founded in 1969, the company has over 6,490 employees.

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