

Meeting Council
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2026 FLEXIBLE VOTING PILOTS

Lead Officer: Tom Pike ext. 2288

Author & Contact Officer: Luke Fattorusso ext. 2174

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 In its manifesto, the Government committed to encouraging greater participation in our democracy through modernising the voting experience; exploring ways to make the in person voting experience more efficient, more convenient, and better aligned with the expectations of today's electors.
- 1.2 To support this, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) invited applications from local authorities in England to pilot schemes at local elections in May 2026, with the objective of making voting in person more efficient, more convenient, and in line with the expectations of modern voters.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Council agree to participate in the Government's 2026 Flexible Voting Pilots, and that the 2026 the pilot submission will include:
 - a centralised voting hub based at the Council's offices in Daneshill House, available for all electors to vote at on Polling Day (in addition to their designated polling station); and,

- early in-person voting, commencing a week before Polling Day (on Thursday 30 April), to include the weekend and Bank Holiday Monday, at the same centralised voting hub as above. The proposed hours of poll would be from 9am to 7pm on weekdays and Saturday, and then from 10am to 4pm on Sunday and Bank Holiday Monday.

2.2 That authority is delegated to the Returning Officer to determine with MHCLG the necessary arrangements of the pilots; agreeing the final details for the pilots that will be administered in Stevenage.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 In August, the government published an Electoral Modernisation Prospectus inviting Councils to apply to participate in the Governments 2026 Flexible Voting Pilots.

3.2 These flexible voting pilot schemes are designed to explore innovative approaches to voting that better reflect the needs and expectations of today's electorate. They 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.

3.3 The four principal areas that MHCLG invited Council's to pilot included:

- Voting at any polling station
- Centralised Voting Hubs
- Mobile polling stations
- Early in-person voting

3.4 The overarching principle for these pilots to be administered and supported effectively is that they would be underpinned by digital Electoral Registers.

3.5 Following discussions and communication amongst key officers, the Leader of the Council, the Electoral Management Software and Electoral Print suppliers, and MHCLG, it was agreed to pursue an application piloting those areas as detailed in the recommendations.

3.6 The deadline for submission of applications provided by MHCLG was 22 September. Under the constitution, it is Council that approves the formal submission in respect of pilot schemes; however, as there was no Council meeting scheduled before the closing date of applications, it was agreed that an application would be submitted for consideration by MHCLG by this deadline, and that Council would then consider this at a subsequent meeting once more details had been determined.

3.7 Section 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 places a duty on Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers to take such steps as they think appropriate to encourage the participation by electors in the electoral process.

3.8 In undertaking these pilots, it will provide electors with greater accessibility and flexibility in the voting process. By utilising a Centralised Voting Hub at

the Council offices in the town centre, electors will have a central and familiar place to cast their vote in advance of Polling Day.

3.9 In addition, following the introduction of the new rules concerning postal vote applications, with electors now having to reapply every three years, it provides a broader range of options for voters to exercise their vote at these elections.

3.10 To create public awareness of the pilot, the Returning Officer will develop a detailed engagement plan, to include, but not limited to:

- Household Notification Letters (HNLs); these letters will be sent in February containing information on who is registered at the property and will be used to communicate information on the pilot via an insert.
- An Election Information letter sent with all Council Tax billing letters in March. This will provide information on the elections taking place and pilot.
- An advert to be included in the Spring addition of the Council's Chronicle magazine for publication in March.
- Dedicated pages will be available on the Council's website containing key election and pilot information.
- Social media messaging will be carried out on the Council's social media platforms on dates agreed and scheduled in advance.
- Posters will be displayed in a variety of areas across the Borough.
- An elector specific information page generated by a QR code will be printed on the Poll Cards.

3.11 The terms, success criteria and evaluation of the pilots will be decided by MHCLG in consultation with the Returning Officer. However, it is intended that we will gather information and evaluate on the following:

- Number of voters who use the early voting and centralised voting hub options
- How the above is broken down by Ward and Polling District Area
- Impact on elector turnout (i.e. whether turnout increases).

3.12 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.

3.13 Should the pilot proceed, a further briefing will be provided to Members in the new year.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

4.1 Section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 allows for the Secretary of State to approve orders for local authorities in England and

Wales to run pilot schemes for innovative electoral procedures at local government elections.

- 4.2 Section 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 places a duty Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers to take such steps as he thinks appropriate to encourage the participation by electors in the electoral process.
- 4.3 Paragraph 17 of the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 permits councils to propose innovative electoral pilot schemes.
- 4.4 Under the Council's Constitution, it is Council that agrees participation and formal submission in respect of pilot schemes.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 Funding for the costs relating to the pilots will be provided by MHCLG. Indicative costings have already been provided to MHCLG, and further costs will be identified as part of ongoing processes between the Returning Officer and MHCLG. Software costs related to the pilot will be procured compliantly adhering to the Procurement Act 2023.

Legal Implications

- 5.2 The Representation of People Act 2000 grants the Secretary of State the power to authorise pilot schemes for local elections through Statutory Orders.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 The preparation of these Orders is a detailed process, and will require close collaboration between the Returning Officer's team and MHCLG officials.
- 5.5 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.
- 5.6 It is intended that the Statutory Orders will be in place and signed by January 2026.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Implications

- 5.7 All Councils anticipate further information on election arrangements in 2026, 2027, and 2028 related to the ongoing Local Government Reorganisation process.

Risk Implications

- 5.8 The Returning Officer, in consultation with the Head of Democratic Services, has considered the additional risks that participation in these pilots would involve; whilst additional resources will be required, it has been determined

that there would be sufficient capacity, with the appropriate funding and support from MHCLG, to undertake the specific pilot areas as outlined in the recommendations.

5.9 As is standard practice at elections, a comprehensive project plan and risk register will be in place taking into account the additional arrangements resulting from the Council's involvement in the flexible voting pilots. These will include resilience measures, including electronic system updated daily to create backups and paper documents updated.

Staffing and Accommodation Implications

5.10 It will be necessary to recruit additional staff to undertake these pilots, with additional training required in respect of the electoral register software that will be used to record electors voting in advance or at the polling stations.

5.11 Further, the Council will utilise its offices at Daneshill House to facilitate early voting. No issues are expected with this as Daneshill House is the central point of contact for the public and is used as a polling station on Polling Day.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

5.12 Whilst there are no equalities and diversity implications directly arising from the pilot, through the piloting of a Centralised Voting Hub based in the Town Centre and additional hours of poll in the days preceding the election, it will provide greater flexibility and accessibility for electors to cast their vote.

Information Technology Implications

5.13 These pilots will be underpinned by software operating digital electoral registers. These will be deployed onto laptops and operated by polling station staff. Having trialled elements of this technology in polling stations at previous elections, polling staff are familiar with this technology and thus the Council is positioned well to take this forward.

5.14 The pilots will also require that the devices used to host the electoral register software have access to a WIFI/internet connection, in order that the central hub and other polling station databases can connect to each other and the registers be updated in real time.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

BD1 Electoral Modernisation Prospectus: Flexible Voting Pilots 2026