

e-Counting in the Westminster elections



In October 2001, The Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions invited applications from Local Authorities to pilot new methods of voting at local and mayoral elections in May 2002.



A number of Councils were given the go ahead to pilot innovative schemes designed to modernise electoral procedures and make voting straightforward,

efficient, secure and above all readily accessible to all. Some of those e-democracy pilots involved e-Voting and e-Counting. DRS worked on a number of the e-Counting projects, one of them involving Westminster City Council.

Westminster City Council's local elections were run in 20 different wards. There were 178 candidates and 6 different parties in total. Each elector was able to vote for up to 3 candidates in each ward. If a manual method of counting had been used, it would have taken around 8 hours to complete. With an average turnout of 27%, DRS counted the votes quickly and accurately in record time taking just 2.5 hours.

e-counting

DRS, winner of the 2002 Queen's Award for Enterprise in International Trade and a British designer and manufacturer of e-Counting solutions, has extensive experience in providing full voting solutions. It has worked on a wide range of projects including the proportional elections in Norway for nine years, elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1998 and 2000 and the high profile London Assembly and Mayoral elections in 2000 - the first in the UK to entirely use e-counting and a mixture of electoral systems.

Such projects are extremely complex, large-volume, involve sensitive information and need to be completed quickly and accurately. DRS has an unprecedented reputation for delivering electoral projects on time, the first time.

Local Authority
all wards full electronic

- Electorate: 132,000
- Wards: 20
- Turnout: 27%
- Postals: 4,000
- Polling stations: 95 stations become 60 polling places
- Count location: Queen Mother Sports Centre
- Scanners: 60



DRS e-Counting in the May 2000 London elections



e-Counting in the Westminster elections

Why use e-Counting?

With 20 wards and 4 parishes, each having a variable number of councillors to be elected, the May 2002 Rugby elections were complex by their very nature. DRS' e-Counting system is designed for such elections. Every ballot paper carries a unique barcode, when the paper is electronically counted, the e-Counting system automatically assigns the vote to the relevant ward or parish. Not only does this eliminate human error, which can be associated with manual counting, it is also much faster than a manual count as the papers do not need to be sorted before counting. e-Counting also maintains voter familiarity as votes are cast using the traditional cross in a box on a ballot paper.

How does it work?

Each ballot paper is scanned by a DRS Imaging Mark Reader which captures and automatically reorients the ballot paper images at high speed, so it doesn't matter which way the ballot paper is fed through the scanner. Image processing is used to determine the voter's intent and their vote is recorded directly into the central database. If there is any doubt over the voter's intent (eg, where too many votes may have been cast) then an image is also saved for later 'on-screen' adjudication. Networked workstations connected to the central database support all other stages of the ballot counting process - verification, adjudication and consolidation.

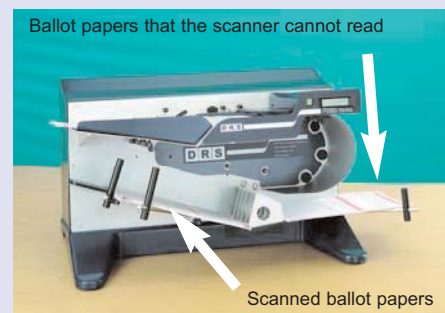
How accurate is it?

The scanners and specially designed ballot papers ensure accurate data capture that eliminates human error. A unique barcode on the reverse of each ballot paper ensures it cannot be counted twice, and a small barcode on the front identifies which contest each ballot is for. The scanner uses these barcodes to ensure a genuine ballot is being scanned and checks that the image has been accurately captured and correctly reorientated. The scanners will only record a clear vote, all other decisions are taken by the Returning Officer.



What about rejected ballot papers?

The scanners will automatically send images of potentially rejected ballot papers (eg, where too many votes may have been cast) to the central database for on-screen checking by the Returning Officer. The Returning Officer will see an on-screen image of the ballot paper and will enter the votes cast or the reason for rejection directly into the central database. Any ballot papers that the scanner cannot read (eg, torn) results in the scanner sending the actual ballot paper to a second 'hopper'. The Returning Officer will then check these ballot papers and manually enter the votes cast or the reason for rejections into the central database.



How secure is it?

There are safeguards built into the computer software to ensure the security of the system. It records every time a member of staff logs on and off every workstation and there is limited access to the system, so logging on at one workstation does not give access to the whole system. Only the Returning Officer will have access to all the information stored. All the data and the ballot papers remain within the control of the Returning Officer after the election, as with any manually counted election.

What difference did voters see when they voted?

The ballot papers were broadly similar to existing designs. The voters might have noticed that their ballot papers had a barcode on them and they were asked not to fold their ballot papers. The voters then posted their unfolded ballot papers face down into the side of a specially designed ballot box.

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