

Briefing

**General election 2019:
how well did local councils
promote registering to vote
leading up to the deadline?**

December 2019

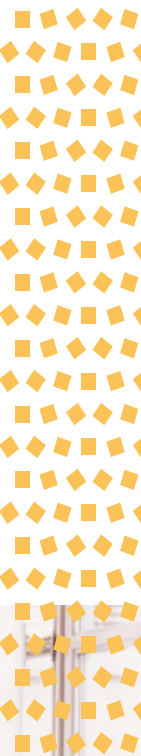
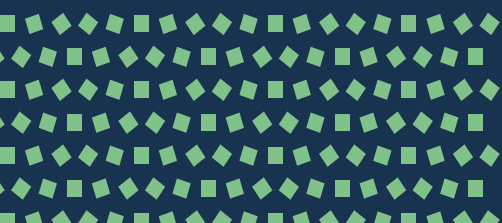


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Background

The 2019 general election timetable began on 6 November with the dissolution of Parliament and the publication of notices of election.

Local government plays a pivotal role in the election process as it provides the mechanism for candidates to stand for election and for citizens to vote. We decided to examine how well a sample of UK councils was facilitating a major facet of this role: voter registration ahead of the 26 November deadline.

Registering to vote is now easier than ever as it can be carried out online via GOV.UK. In the 48 hours leading up to the deadline, the government reported more than a million people registering online, 40% of whom were under 25, traditionally an under-represented group at the polls.

Methodology

We looked at 30 local authority websites spread geographically across the UK, comprising six from Scotland, six from Wales, one from Northern Ireland and 17 from England. The English sites covered different tiers and types of local authority: three London boroughs, three county councils, three shire districts, four English unitary authorities and four metropolitan districts. All the councils surveyed were members of Socitm.

Our survey consisted of fourteen questions about registering to vote, information on candidates, previous election results, polling cards and use of Twitter and Facebook. We gave each site an overall score (0-3) judging the quality of the experience and information found. The survey was carried out between 21 and 25 November 2019.

Summary of findings



- › Just under half (47%) of council sites visited were rated poor overall
- › In general, sites in England performed slightly better than those in Scotland and Wales whose results were very similar in our sample
- › The best performing sites were Birmingham City Council, London Borough of Kingston upon Thames, Manchester City Council and Mendip District Council
- › We found nothing at all about the election on the only Northern Ireland site we surveyed: Belfast City Council
- › Only one of the three English county councils gave out any information about the forthcoming election and linked through to relevant pages on the district sites
- › Well over half of councils (70%) mentioned the registration deadline somewhere in the site and 63% provided a very clear link to register online.
- › The user experience could be very different depending on the landing point and journey through the site, with key useful information missed
- › Too often councils published statutory notices of election as downloadable documents with insufficient user-friendly explanation as to what they contained
- › Information about polling cards and when to expect them was often missing or buried too deep
- › Social media accounts were being used to promote voter registration in around half of councils

Detailed findings

English county council survey results are excluded from the statistics reported against each question below because electoral registration is a district function and not directly the responsibility of the county councils. We felt it was still relevant to see how well they answered key questions, since the split between district and county functions often causes confusion locally and it is important that signposting services are provided between the tiers.

Particularly over such an important issue as democracy. We surveyed three counties, but only one of them, Buckinghamshire, had any relevant content at this stage. It was found only through browsing through the site structure and consisted of a single sentence and deep links into the district council sites. There was nothing about registering to vote but previous general election results were published.

One of the other county sites had results for the 2015 election but had inexplicably missed off the 2017 one. All three counties had a strong presence on Twitter and Facebook, but none had posted anything about the forthcoming general election or registering to vote.

Belfast City Council had posted nothing on social media, and we could find no mention of the general election or registering to vote anywhere in its website. This is - no doubt - due to the fact that electoral registration in Northern Ireland is handled by a separate entity, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

Q1

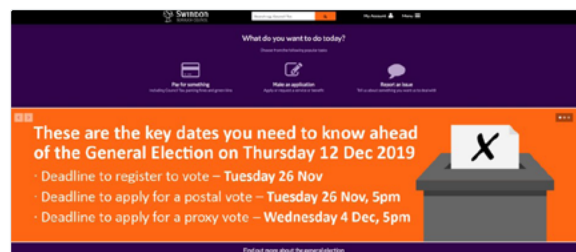
Is there anything about the forthcoming general election / voter registration on the home page? (63% yes)

We looked to see if there was a news item, banner ad or splash on the home page to draw attention to voter registration in this critical period, just a few days before the deadline. Only half of Welsh and Scottish home pages featured anything at all about the election. A few sites such as Mendip DC, Birmingham, Sunderland, Kingston upon Thames and Swindon had very noticeable banners or adverts and in most cases featured the date of the deadline.

Home page adverts usually signposted people directly into the GOV.UK online registration page. From there the deadline is clearly promoted and voters are encouraged to check if they are already correctly registered or if they need to do so by calling their local registration office. The best sites directed users via their general election pages where the list of candidates and other key information was also published.

Good practice

- **Swindon Council's** home page advert is unmissable and clearly draws attention to the registration deadlines.

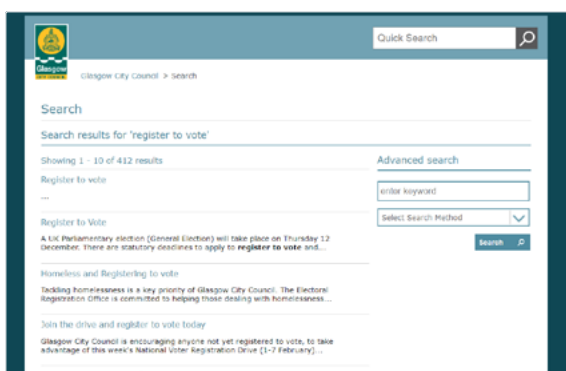


Q2 Does a search for 'register to vote' produce relevant content relating to this general election? (78% yes)

Performance was better here, with most site searches (78%) leading to a page about registering to vote. Standard content featuring permanently on the site had been adapted to reflect the current general election timetable on the best sites: on the rest it was usually, but not always, possible to navigate to information about current elections using section menus. This question highlighted some inconsistencies in the user experience depending on which route was taken when search results produced several promising results. Cheshire West and Chester had high quality, well presented content across two pages picked up by the search: 'How to vote' and 'Electoral register'. The first of these explained how to check whether you are already registered, but not how to register (no link to GOV.UK to register online) and the second featured a very clear link to register online, but not the useful information about how to check.

Good practice

- **Glasgow City Council** had a very clear reference to the forthcoming election in the first result.



Q3 Is the deadline for registering to vote made clear? (70% yes)

At this critical moment for registering to vote we expected to see heavy promotion of the deadline on electoral registration pages. Most sites did reference the deadline amongst the general election content, but often the voter registration page consisted of generic content for the election process. Some councils relied entirely on GOV.UK to provide deadline information. Councils need to be aware that users may well miss some content and land directly on registration pages deep within the site. It's important therefore to link related pages together to avoid key content being missed.

Good practice

- **Mendip District Council** was one of only a few that promoted the deadline in its standard voter registration content as well as amongst the general election 2019 pages.

For the next six questions we gave a rating of 0-3 where 0 meant no information was found and 3 provided an excellent user experience. The first of these (Q4) proved the least well answered.

Q4 How easy is it to check whether I am already registered to vote? (average less than 1 out of 3)

We were hoping to see amongst the information about how to register to vote an explanation of how to check first whether you are already

registered correctly. None of the councils surveyed yet offered this as an online facility, but a very few did encourage people to call or email the electoral registration office to check. The poor performance in this question seemed surprising at a time when research was published claiming that over nine million voters were registered at the wrong address (source: The Electoral Commission 26/09/19). Once the user is passed to GOV.UK to register online, there is encouragement to check by contacting your local electoral registration office and a postcode search is provided to identify the right local authority. Checking would be so much quicker if the phone number was given whilst the user was still on their local council site. We felt that sites giving out a phone number as well as an email address were the most helpful, particularly as with the deadline looming citizens needed to be sure of a quick response. Scottish sites averaged a higher score (1.2) for this question than their English and Welsh counterparts (0.7 and 0.3 respectively).

Good practice

- ▶ **Perth and Kinross Council** gave clear instructions on the voter registration page, including a telephone number as well as an email address: *'If you are not sure if you are already registered to vote then contact the local Electoral Registration Officer by emailing perth@tayside-vjb.gov.uk or call 01738 630303.'*

Q5

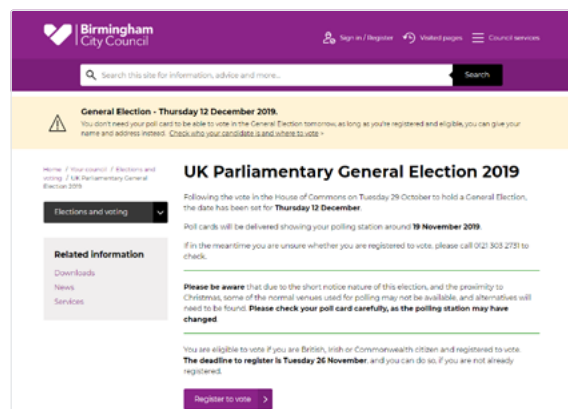
How easy is it to find out how to apply online to register to vote? (average 2.5 out of 3)

This question was much better answered with 63% of sites surveyed achieving the highest rating of 3. Almost all sites provided a prominent deep link through to GOV.UK. Sometimes the council helpfully explained that your National Insurance

number was needed to complete the online process and reminded voters of the deadline for this general election. Scores were similar across the geographical spread for this question.

Good practice

- ▶ **Birmingham City Council's** information about the general election was very helpful in communicating all the key dates and deadlines in the election process, including registering to vote and applying for postal and proxy voting.



Q6

How easy is it to find out how to apply for a postal vote? (average 2.3 out of 3)

Most sites had clear information about postal and proxy votes together with the content about registering to vote and just over half (52%) achieved a rating of 3. It was important to include the deadline here too for this election. Sites didn't achieve the highest score if their postal voting content was generic and no links to the general election deadline information could be seen. Sites in England and Scotland had the same average score of 2.5 for this question, whilst Welsh sites lagged slightly behind with 2.0.

Good practice

- **Midlothian and Birmingham City Councils** explained when postal votes would be likely to arrive for the general election and encouraged people to think about whether they might be on holiday for the period and need a proxy vote instead.
- **Bracknell Forest Council** allowed users to scan the completed application form and email it to them.

Q7 How easy is it to find a list of candidates and the parties they represent? (average 1.6 out of 3)

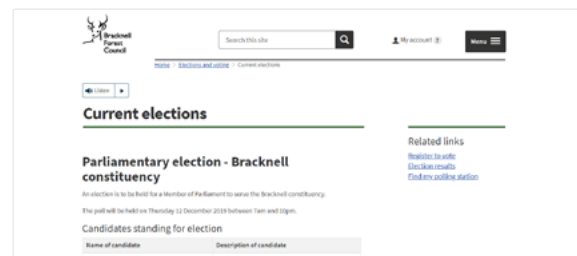
Almost all sites that published this information did so in the form of a statutory notice that had to be downloaded (usually PDF format). Councils must be very careful about what information they present about candidates and how they present it as they are restricted in the pre-election period (purdah). However, using the official legal terminology 'statement of persons nominated' as the only way of referring to candidates when linking to or labelling documents is unhelpful to the general public unused to these terms. We also felt that it was not necessary to rely only on downloadable formats that are not always easy to access. In some cases, the only document seen was titled 'Notice of poll', with no indication that it also contained the only list of candidates. The average ratings were consequently lower for this question with only 14.8% awarded a 3 rating. Almost half (44.4%) received a poor rating of 1. The average rating in Wales (1.5) was slightly higher than in Scotland (1.3) with both behind England (1.9).

Good practice

- **Midlothian Council** published its Notice of poll in two parts and used helpful link text to explain upfront what it contained, including using the word 'candidates' rather than 'persons nominated'.



- **The London Borough of Kingston upon Thames, Bracknell Forest and Manchester City Councils** went one better and published the list of candidates in a table in the web page itself (in addition to the downloadable statutory document).



Q8 How easy is it to find further information about the candidates / parties (e.g. link to the party website)? (average less than 1 out of 3)

No doubt mindful of the publicity restrictions in the pre-election period (purdah), no councils provided links to party websites or indeed

any further information whatsoever about individual candidates. The majority scored zero for this question, but where councils had suggested voters contact the candidates or their political parties to find out further information, we gave a score of 1. This happened more often in Wales and not at all in Scotland.

Q9

How easy is it to find election results for my constituency from the last general election including how many votes or what percentage of the vote each party/candidate gained?
(average 1.8 out of 3)

Tactical voting in areas where the voter's first choice of party has little support is becoming increasingly popular. General election 2019 pages very rarely provided links to previous election results so, website users typically needed to navigate to the elections section to find these archives. In a few cases results of the last general election were missing, but it was usually possible to find them. We gave the highest scores where it was very easy to interpret the data and see who had been elected and the spread of votes using colourful pie charts. Just under a third of sites (29.6%) were awarded a score of 3. Sites in England again averaged a slightly better score of 2 than those in Wales (1.8) and Scotland (1.5).

Good practice

- › **West Dunbartonshire** provided a very rare link from the general election 2019 page to view previous parliamentary election results. Sometimes we would see a link to recent local election results but not parliamentary ones.

- › **Manchester City Council** had a link to 'find your constituency' by postcode - very useful for large areas which have several constituencies.
- › **Cardiff Council** was one of several providing colourful pie charts to illustrate share of the vote.

Q10

Is it clear when I can expect to receive a polling card? (30% yes)

With some councils warning that polling stations may have changed due to the unusual time of year and the short notice of this election, polling cards have an important role to play. It was particularly helpful when sites told voters when polling cards were due to arrive so that they could check and register to vote if they didn't come when expected. It was disappointing not to see more councils publishing information about this important aspect of the election process and timetable. England fared much better for this question with 42.8% providing this information compared to only 16.7% in Wales and Scotland.

Good practice

- › **Kingston upon Thames and Monmouthshire Councils** were exemplary in the information provided. Kingston informed voters that polling cards are not needed on the day of the general election and Monmouthshire reminded people to plan their voting arrangements bearing in mind that information would be sent later than usual due to the short notice.

Monmouthshire Council



- Kingston upon Thames:** 'Poll cards will be sent to eligible electors who are registered to vote by 1 November week commencing Monday 11 November 2019. Anyone who registers to vote after 1 November will have their poll card sent out at a later date. It is important to remember you do not need your poll card to be able to vote - just go to your designated polling station and if you are registered you will be issued with a ballot paper.'

Kingston upon Thames also had a comprehensive polling station finder with several options including a postcode search, a link to an external national postcode search on the 'Where do I vote' website, a polling district directory and a map of polling stations.

Q11 Does the council have a corporate Twitter account? (96% yes)

Q12 Can you see any tweets about registering to vote? (67% yes)

Twitter is used by nearly every council surveyed and we noted that accounts were largely active with several tweets and re-tweets posted daily. Some accounts focused solely on events or

current campaigns and around a third missed the opportunity to use Twitter to promote voter registration in the week leading up to the deadline. On the Conwy site we found 'Democracy Conwy', an account dedicated to publishing notices of election but sadly there were no tweets about registering to vote. Indeed, although all Welsh sites we looked at had a Twitter account in use, only half of them had posted about registering to vote whereas the figure for Scotland was around two thirds and for England it was higher still at 78.6%. We usually encountered general electoral commission campaign material urging the public to register but occasionally specific groups of people were targeted such as young people and ethnic minorities.

Good practice

- Birmingham City Council** was very active on Twitter and Facebook giving information on deadlines, how to register (including students), postal votes, proxies and, also, how you shouldn't be intimidated by people to change your voting intentions.



Q13

Does the council have a corporate Facebook account? (96% yes)

Q14

Can you see any posts about registering to vote? (52% yes)

Councils with Twitter accounts had Facebook accounts too but although they tended to publish on both channels simultaneously, the overall output on Twitter was greater. This meant that sometimes we saw sharing or re-tweeting of posts about electoral registration on Twitter but no corresponding posts on Facebook. We saw relevant posts on only a third of Facebook pages in Scotland and Wales. In England 71.4% of our sample had Facebook posts encouraging voter registration.

Good practice

- West Lothian's promotion was unmissable as it was using the Electoral Commission advert as its Facebook cover photo.



- Birmingham City Council's thoughtful range of communication tactics involved reminding people who had recently moved that they needed to register at their new address as well as informing students that they can be registered at both term-time and home addresses.



Overall rating (average 1.6 out of 3)

At the end of the survey the reviewers gave an overall rating from 0 to 3 on the quality of the information found and user experience. These scores are on the low side with more councils receiving a rating of 1 (poor) than any other category (43%). The four councils (13%) who achieved the highest rating of 3 were all located in England and came from a range of types of council, including a district. Wales and Scotland were behind England but performed equally well as each other, with half of each receiving a 2 rating and the other half a 1.



Sites achieving the highest rating overall

Birmingham City Council

Reviewer comment:

"Not only is there good promotion about registering to vote but the content is extremely well written and very up to date. It's clear that the information provided is for the current election process and the deadlines are prominently displayed. I found useful information on postal votes and deadlines, but also proxy voting. Good use of social media, but information on past elections and candidates etc. is in PDF form."

London Borough of

Kingston upon Thames

Reviewer comment:

"Well thought out and information was easy to find. I thought that the information on poll cards was very good, including the fact that you do not need it to vote. It also pointed to a 'find your polling station' by postcode. This means that if you've lost your poll card you would still know where to go."

Manchester City Council

Reviewer comment:

"Generally the content was comprehensive and easy to read. I thought it was innovative to offer a link to 'find your constituency' by postcode, particularly for those new to the area. There was some confusion with the customer journey. One link says 'Current election' and takes people to one page, but 'UK general election 2019' takes you to another. 'Register to vote' takes you to another different page."

Mendip District Council

Reviewer comment:

"Excellent promotion on the home page and generally easy to navigate. The 'register to vote' page referred to the current general election and so deadlines were very clear."

Appendix

A. List of sites surveyed

England	Council type
Buckinghamshire	CC
Staffordshire	CC
Cambridgeshire	CC
Swindon	EU
Bracknell Forest	EU
Darlington	EU
Cheshire West and Chester	EU
Redbridge	LB
Tower Hamlets	LB
Kingston Upon Thames	LB
Sunderland City Council	MD
Calderdale MBC	MD
Birmingham City Council	MD
Manchester City Council	MD
North Lincolnshire council	SD
Northampton BC	SD
Mendip	SD

Scotland	Council type
Perth & Kinross	SU
Falkirk	SU
Glasgow	SU
West Dunbartonshire	SU
West Lothian	SU
Midlothian	SU

Wales	Council type
Cardiff	WU
Conwy	WU
Vale of Glamorgan	WU
Wrexham	WU
Monmouthshire	WU
Isle of Anglesey	WU

Northern Ireland	Council type
Belfast City Council	NI

B. Survey questions

1. Is there anything about the forthcoming general election/voter registration on the home page? (Y/N)
2. Does a search for 'register to vote' produce relevant content relating to this General election? (Y/N)
3. Is the deadline for registering to vote made clear? (Y/N)
4. How easy is it to check whether I am already registered to vote? (0-3)
5. How easy is it to find out how to apply online to register to vote? (0-3)
6. How easy is it to find out how to apply for a postal vote? (0-3)
7. How easy is it to find a list of candidates and the parties they represent? (0-3)
8. How easy is it to find further information about the candidates / parties (e.g. link to the party website)? (0-3)
9. How easy is it to find election results for my constituency from the last General election including how many votes or what percentage of the vote each party / candidate gained? (0-3)
10. Is it clear when I can expect to receive a polling card? (Y/N)
11. Does the council have a corporate Twitter account? (Y/N)
12. Can you see any tweets about registering to vote? (Y/N)
13. Does the council have a corporate Facebook account? (Y/N)
14. Can you see any posts about registering to vote? (Y/N)
15. How do you rate the site overall? (0-3)



C. Good practice examples



Birmingham City Council

www.birmingham.gov.uk



Midlothian Council

www.midlothian.gov.uk



Bracknell Forest Council

www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk



Monmouthshire Council

www.monmouthshire.gov.uk



Cardiff Council

www.cardiff.gov.uk



Perth and Kinross Council

www.pkc.gov.uk



Glasgow City Council

www.glasgow.gov.uk



Swindon Council

www.swindon.gov.uk



The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

www.kingston.gov.uk



West Dunbartonshire Council

www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk



Manchester City Council

www.manchester.gov.uk



West Lothian Council

www.westlothian.gov.uk



Mendip District Council

www.mendip.gov.uk



About the authors

Helen Williams and Lamorna Spry are freelance usability consultants specialising in the public sector.

They are both longstanding members of Socitm's Better Connected team, regularly reviewing local authority websites and contributing to the influential annual report and associated publications.

They are now engaged in supporting Socitm's service-specific reviews and its Service Design Maturity Assessment (SDMA)

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