

Section 1

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Introduction

Over 46 million people are registered to vote in elections in the UK.¹ Voters should be able to ‘make their mark’ easily and confidently, knowing that their vote will be counted in the way they intended. Ballot papers and other voter materials should not create barriers to that.

Poorly-designed voter materials can contribute to ballot papers being rejected, cause voter confusion and ultimately, lead to the outcome of the election not being a true reflection of the electorate’s choice. It is important to remember that:

An election is not held to test voters’ ability to follow instructions, but to receive instructions from the voters as to which candidates they will elect. No legitimate public purpose is served by designs that distort those instructions.

The Brennan Center for Justice²

This guidance is intended for use by anyone involved in the future design of voter materials, particularly government policy-makers. It is aimed at people who are already familiar with elections in the UK, and with the law and practice surrounding the design and production of voter materials. The guidance covers:

- ballot papers
- guidance to voters in polling stations
- instructions to voters in polling booths
- postal voting statements and declarations of identity
- supplementary postal voting guidance

¹ Figure given is for electors registered for local government elections in the UK as at 1 December 2008.

² Report available at www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/better_ballots/

The guidance sets out how voter materials used at elections and referendums across the UK should be designed. It takes the nature and function of existing materials as a starting point, but recommends changes to their presentation, and particularly their content, which would improve their design.³

About user-focused design

This guidance is based on the principles of usability and accessibility, which means putting the needs of the voter first. The guidance has been developed on the basis of inclusive design. Inclusive design is defined as:

The design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible ... without the need for special adaptation or specialised design.

The British Standards Institute (2005)⁴

Therefore there are no references in the guidance to producing documents in different versions, or tailoring them to particular audiences, although where something is particularly helpful to a certain group of people, this is explained. Instead of separately addressing the needs of different groups, for example people who have low literacy, or disabled voters, the guidance contains good practice in making design as inclusive as possible for all voters.

Understanding your audience

While voting may seem straightforward to people who work with elections and understand how voting systems work, others can find it difficult, daunting and even intimidating. Thinking about the voter, and what their needs are, will help you to design documents that are inclusive and user-friendly. This does not mean you are 'dumbing down'. It does not reduce the level or quality of the service you provide, and it does not make you seem unprofessional. In fact, producing clear, simple documents is not easy, but if you get it right, you will make a positive impression. Even small changes, such as using a font size that is easy to read, can make a big difference to voters.

³ There is also a version of the guidance for electoral administrators which reflects the current legislative requirements for voter materials.

⁴ British Standard 7000-6:2005. *Design management systems. Managing inclusive design. Guide.*

The right to vote is universal, and the electorate spans from people who are very comfortable reading, following instructions, and completing written documents, to people who will struggle to do so. There are many adults who have low levels of literacy, and so may struggle to read and, more importantly, understand information on unfamiliar topics. Around 16%, or 5.2 million, of 16 to 65-year-olds in England have literacy levels that mean they would not pass an English GCSE. Of those, 3.5 million have literacy levels at or below those expected of an 11-year-old.⁵ In addition, at every election there will be people who have never voted before, people who may not have voted using that particular voting system before, or people for whom English is not their first language.

All of these factors emphasise the importance of making the voting process as straightforward and accessible as possible. People will favour experience, familiarity, and ease. The design of voter materials needs to accommodate this, and where possible, follow standard rules and systems that people use and follow in everyday tasks to making voting as accessible to the largest number of people.

⁵ Figures from the National Literacy Trust:

www.literacytrust.org.uk/database/stats/adultstats.html

Source: Department for Education and Skills (2003) *National needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills*.