

Weekend voting and shopping centre polling stations to be trialled

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Some voters in May local elections to cast their ballot in a shopping centre and on weekends as part of plans to make voting easier

Some voters in England will be able to cast their ballot in a shopping centre and on weekends as part of plans to make voting easier and more convenient for people during May's local elections.

The way we vote at the polling booth has not changed since 1872. Four areas are taking part in new pilots which will give people more choice over where and when they vote, by turning popular venues into polling booths and letting people vote before polling day.

In Milton Keynes, voters can have their say in the city's main shopping centre - centre:mk - rather than being restricted to a single designated polling station. This could eventually be rolled out across the country in future elections along high streets and in town centres.

People in Cambridge, Tunbridge Wells and North Hertfordshire will be able to cast their vote in person ahead of the election, including on the weekend. This will stop people being limited to just one polling day.

Voters in these places will be able to visit central buildings across their area at a time that suits them, such as the Guildhall in Cambridge's city centre.

This will make voting more convenient, accessible and efficient for local people - and could eventually happen in all UK elections.

Minister for Democracy Samantha Dixon said:

The way we vote in person has not adapted to people's busy lives, with voters often given no choice but to cast their ballot at strictly set polling stations within limited hours.

Our trials will make polling days more convenient and test out the first real changes for over 100 years, bringing our democracy into the 21st century.

Further plans for future pilots could include mobile voting stations that travel to different locations, potentially including care homes, universities, or community centres. Other plans could include voters casting their vote at any polling station within the local authority area rather than being restricted to a designated location.

At the same time the integrity and security of the UK's voting system will continue to be protected, with participating local authorities using existing safeguards, and robust technology, with strong support from the government throughout.

Local authorities will continue to operate traditional polling stations alongside the new options, and people will still be able to vote by post or proxy, meaning voters can choose the method that works

best for them.

This comes alongside the government's landmark Representation of the People Bill which reduces barriers to participation including a landmark change to give votes to 16 year olds, along with tougher rules on political donations to tackle risks around foreign interference in our democracy.

Peter Stanyon, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, said:

These pilots are a great start to exploring different ways to offer electors greater choice about when and where they cast their vote. Weekend and early voting, plus voting hubs at places like shopping centres, are used to good effect in many democracies and we hope will also be successful here. Well done to the election teams who have stepped up to take these pilots forward, we look forward to learning from you.

William Benson, Chief Executive and Returning Officer for Tunbridge Wells borough said:

I am very pleased that Tunbridge Wells is part of the pilot scheme. It's important that every eligible elector uses their vote and three hubs in key locations across the borough will make it even easier.

Voters can be assured these new arrangements are just as secure as the polling stations they're used to, and the same helpful staff will be there to guide people through the process.

Leader of Milton Keynes City Council, Cllr Pete Marland said:

Milton Keynes is proud to be leading the way as the UK's first pilot area for a central voting hub, making it easier and more convenient for people to vote. We're committed to improving democratic participation, and this innovative approach will give residents greater flexibility.

Melanie Stimpson, Democratic Services Manager and Returning Officer for North Hertfordshire said:

We are very pleased to have been selected to take part in the flexible voting pilots. We know that people lead busy lives and face real challenges in finding time to vote. Being able to explore new approaches is important to understand how we can better support of residents and collaborate our Council priorities of thriving committees and accessible services.

Robert Pollock, Returning Officer for the City of Cambridge:

Cambridge is renowned for science and tech innovation. We want to bring that mindset to test how we can make voting more inclusive and convenient for all our residents. We already have higher than average turnout in Cambridge. I'd really like this trial to help

us get to over 40% at the May local elections.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/weekend-voting-and-shopping-centre-polling-stations-to-be-trialled>