
Council

8 September 2026

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member Community Safety and Cohesion – Councillor J McNicholas

Director approving submission of the report:

Director of Law, Governance and Safer Communities

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Flexible Voting Pilots – May 2027

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive summary:

The Government's manifesto committed to encouraging greater participation in our democracy through modernising the voting experience. To support this the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has invited local authorities to apply to take part in Flexible Voting Pilots at elections in May 2027. The programme is intended to gather further evidence about voter behaviour, accessibility and operational delivery before wider decisions are made on future electoral reform.

The 2027 programme follows four pilot schemes delivered during the May 2026 local elections. The preferred models for 2027 are early in-person voting and voting hubs, although authorities may propose alternative approaches with additional justification.

The pilots may offer opportunities to improve convenience, accessibility and inclusion for electors, while supporting evidence-based service design. Participating authorities must be able to demonstrate robust governance, operational capacity, risk management, evaluation arrangements and financial record keeping. Government funding will be available for

approved pilots, with the final amount depending on the nature and scale of the proposed pilot.

This report asks Council to consider whether Coventry City Council should submit an application to participate in the 2027 programme. This opportunity would present Coventry with a chance to be involved in modernisation pilots using digital innovation to advance accessibility and inclusive participation. The application deadline for submitting an application to participate is 15 September 2026.

Recommendations:

Council is recommended to:

1. Note the Government invitation to apply to participate in Flexible Voting Pilots at the May 2027 elections.
2. Approve that Coventry City Council should submit an application to participate in the 2027 Flexible Voting Pilots programme for early in person voting and on the day voting hub(s) as outlined in paragraph 2.4 of this report.
3. Delegate authority to the Director of Law, Governance and Safer Communities as Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer (following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Cohesion and Leaders of all Political Groups), to finalise and submit the application by the stated deadline.
4. Subject to the receipt of Ministerial approval of Coventry being selected to participate in the 2027 Flexible Voting Pilots programme, delegate authority to the Director of Law, Governance and Safer Communities to approve the terms for the pilot and the funding arrangements and to finalise the arrangements and enter into any required legal agreements.
4. Note that, if the application is approved, a further implementation plan will be developed covering delivery, consultation, communications, risk, evaluation and financial management, this will be monitored by the Electoral Strategy Board which meets regularly from October to June for each election.

List of Appendices included:

None

Background papers:

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – Prospectus Flexible Voting Pilots 2027

Electoral Commission Report – 2026 Flexible voting pilots evaluation - [2026 flexible voting pilots evaluation | Electoral Commission](#)

Other useful documents

None

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

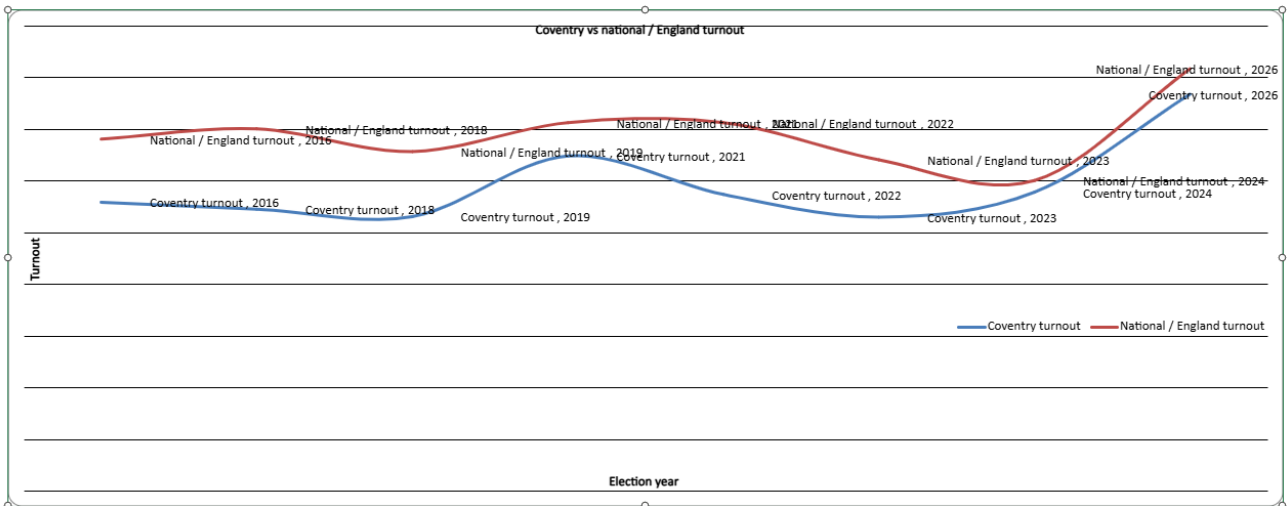
Will this report go to Council?

Yes – 8 September, 2026

Report title: Flexible Voting Pilots 2027

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1. The Government has invited local authorities to apply to take part in Flexible Voting Pilots at elections in May 2027. The stated purpose is to strengthen the evidence base on voter behaviour, accessibility and operational delivery before wider decisions are made about future electoral reform. The programme follows four English pilot schemes delivered in May 2026, covering early in-person voting and voting hubs.
- 1.2. It is the duty of the Returning Officer & Electoral Registration Officer to promote voter registration, democratic engagement and improve turnout at all elections. This has been done in a number of ways in Coventry, through communications campaigns, elector mailings and continuously working on our democratic engagement strategy. However, we know we need to do more. Over the last decade, turnout has generally been below the wider England or national election comparator in Coventry as detailed in the table below. There therefore remains scope to consider whether additional voting options could support participation, particularly where barriers relate to convenience, accessibility or awareness.



- 1.3. The terms, success criteria and evaluation of the pilots will be decided by MHCLG in consultation with the Returning Officer. However, it is likely that the two key aims of the pilot will be to evaluate:
- a) The success and cost of digitalisation of polling stations (this does not extend to online voting or counting just polling station registers) and real time communication with a central voting hub; and
 - b) The success of convenience and accessibility enhancements.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1. Option 1 – Not to apply to do a flexible voting pilot. The Council would not participate in the 2027 Flexible Voting Pilots programme. This would avoid additional operational complexity but would mean Coventry does not contribute local evidence to the national pilot program. There would also be a lost opportunity to potentially increase

voter turnout and affording Coventry residents of more opportunities to participate and for greater accessibility.

- 2.2. Option 2 – Apply for early in person voting only. Electors would be able to vote before polling day at designated venues and times. This could provide more flexibility for electors there would be careful consideration on the location of venues, staffing, ballot paper security, storage and election processes.
- 2.3. Option 3 – Apply for an on the day voting hub model only. Electors would be able to vote at a voting hub which would be situated in a central location, rather than only at their allocated station on polling day. This could improve convenience, particularly in a high-footfall location, it will require resilient real-time electoral management arrangements, ICT, staff training and contingencies.
- 2.4. Option 4 – Apply for early in person voting and an on the day voting hub(s). Electors would be able to vote before polling day at designated venues and times and at a voting hub which would be situated in a central location, rather than only at their allocated station on polling day. This could improve flexibility and convenience for electors, particularly in a high-footfall location, it will require careful consideration on location of venues, staffing, ballot paper security, storage, resilient real-time electoral management arrangements, ICT, staff training and contingencies.
- 2.5. The recommended proposal is option 4 as this will give the opportunity to test both of the preferred models in the 2027 pilots and help inform any future changes.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1. No public consultation has been undertaken at this stage. The current decision is whether to submit an application to the Government pilot programme. Political Groups have been briefed. If the Council submits an application and it is approved, further engagement and communications will be developed with Members, electors, polling station staff, accessibility stakeholders, suppliers and other relevant partners as part of the implementation plan.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1. The time table is detailed below:

Milestone	Indicative timing
Council decision on whether to proceed with an application	8 September 2026
Submission of application	By the stated deadline of 15 September 2026
Government consideration of applications and confirmation of approved pilots	End of October 2026
Detailed implementation planning, procurement and communications	Following any approval
Delivery of pilot	May 2027 elections
Evaluation, expenditure evidence and lessons learned	Following the election

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Resources and Director of Law, Governance and Safer Communities

5.1. Financial Implications

5.2. Government funding will be available to support approved pilots through grants and a justification led process. The precise level of funding would depend on the nature and scale of the proposed pilot. Participating authorities would be expected to keep detailed records of expenditure, provide information on pilot costs, support value-for-money assessment and submit evidence of expenditure following the election.

5.3. The pilot would therefore operate at nil cost to Coventry City Council, but there are also potential resource benefits of participating in the trial, as knowledge, software enhancements and hardware would potentially be secured for the Council for future use. Similarly additional funds would be available for a communications plan, which would supplement work to boost engagement generally and key messages ahead of May 2027.

5.4. The pilot will require procurement of software and hardware elements which will be done through the council's procurement rules utilising existing arrangements with electoral print and software suppliers.

5.5. Legal Implications

5.6. If approved, the Council is required to collaborate with MHCLG officers to draft bespoke Statutory Orders for Coventry. 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. It is intended that the Statutory Orders will be in place and signed by January 2027. The regulations providing for electoral administration pilots and governing how they operate are set out in the Representation of the People Act 2000, section 101. The statutory criteria for the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the pilots are also set out in the same section.

6. Other implications

6.1. How will this contribute to the One Coventry Plan?

6.2. The proposal supports the One Coventry Plan vision of working together to improve the city and the lives of those who live, work and study here. A flexible voting pilot could support improved outcomes and help tackle inequalities by testing whether more convenient or accessible voting arrangements reduce barriers to participation. It may also support the Council's role as a partner, enabler and leader by contributing local evidence to national electoral reform work.

6.3. How is risk being managed?

6.4. Key risks include operational capacity, venue availability, ICT resilience, ballot paper security, staff training, voter communications, contingency planning and delivery alongside business-as-usual election activities. These risks would be managed through a detailed project plan, risk register, governance arrangements, supplier engagement, testing, staff training and clear escalation routes.

6.5. What is the impact on the organisation?

6.6. Participation would create additional work for Electoral Services and supporting services, including ICT, procurement, communications, finance and legal. The scale of the impact would depend on the pilot model approved. If an application is successful, the implementation plan will identify staffing, training, technology, accommodation, supplier and communications requirements.

6.7. Equalities / EIA?

6.8. The pilots are intended to support electors who may face barriers to participation, including disabled voters and communities less likely to engage. An Equality Impact Assessment screening should be completed if the Council proceeds, with particular consideration given to disabled voters, older people, young people, people with caring responsibilities, people with limited digital access, and residents who may be less likely to engage with traditional polling arrangements.

6.9. Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment?

6.10. No significant climate change or environmental implications have been identified at this stage.

6.11. Implications for partner organisations?

6.12. Participation would involve working with MHCLG, independent evaluators, the Electoral Commission where relevant, venues, electoral management system suppliers, ICT providers and local accessibility or community partners. The implementation plan would set out partner roles and engagement requirements.

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