

CIVICA

Cotswold District Council takes steps to modernise polling day

- Digitised identification and reduced admin
- Complete ballot paper accounts in just a couple of clicks
- Guaranteed accuracy

Efficient polling station procedures are a key component of democratic elections. It is the responsibility of the returning officer, electoral administrators and polling station staff to ensure that both electoral registration and voting operate accurately, smoothly and seamlessly.

While the basic procedures used in polling stations have been around since the 1872 Ballot Act, statutory regulations continue to evolve, as do the efforts to make collecting and counting votes as efficient and accurate as possible. It's also important to move with the times to enable democracy to continue to be accessible and engaging for the next generation of voters. For Cotswold District Council, this meant taking steps to digitise its polling stations with the introduction of Civica's specialist electoral services solution – Civica Polling Station.

A large rural district

Cotswold District Council (CDC) covers 450 square miles of largely rural areas with a population of over 90,000 residents. Across the district there are 110 separate polling stations. When it comes to polling day, CDC had previously needed to equip every station with printed electoral roll documentation and stationery, which would incur a significant postage bill.

Polling station teams would spend the day on site to enable and record voters before the statutory responsibility of checking and counting all ballot papers manually. After a long day in the polling station, teams are required to complete a number of tasks involving high levels of concentration and accuracy. These occur after they have closed the polling and before they can then transfer the ballot papers to the count venue. It was a well-rehearsed effort, but one that could be delivered more effectively with the introduction of software.

When Rob Weaver became chief executive at CDC, taking an innovative and modern approach to serving local citizens was central to his vision for delivering council services. He recognised that elections offered one of the most important touch points between voters and CDC, and this led him and his elections team to champion a new approach for polling day that would demonstrate greater efficiency and enhance the experience for citizens and polling station staff alike. It was also important to consider how to engage the next generation of electoral staff as well as voters by adopting software to enhance legislative processes and bring them into the 21st century.

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COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introducing a future-proofed new software

Civica Polling Station is a web-based app that allows polling staff to easily and securely issue ballot papers in seconds. Staff will scan the QR code on the polling card, complete the voter ID check and register the elector into the polling station electronically before a ballot paper is issued. They then scan the QR code on the ballot paper before the elector goes to vote. The software tracks everything without any need for manual cross-checks and can be operated across any device, whether a tablet, phone or on desktop. This can be delivered either via existing council-owned devices or devices can be provided as part of the service.

One member of the CDC polling station staff said: "I really like the tablet system. It mitigates any mistakes being made and is very easy to use. I would definitely recommend it to other polling stations."

While another commented: "Last election's use of the system was a doddle. I recall feeling far less stressed when handing the tablet back. I had no concerns about uploading data and having the data analysis in real time was good."

Real-time reporting to streamline operations

Digitising the process of registering electors presenting themselves to vote at their polling station means that everything is tracked in real time. Returning officers and electoral administrators can easily monitor progress throughout polling day and will have instant access to final reports as soon as polling stations close. A one-click integration with Civica Xpress Electoral Management System enables link-up with the live marked register to record exactly who on the electoral register has cast a vote.

The software can be managed centrally and run across multiple polling stations, producing accurate, secure, real-time reporting to give a clear overview of activity on polling day as well as the data needed for forward planning. This can include turnout figures and a detailed breakdown of activity at each polling station to understand where and when resources are needed most so that operations can be streamlined.

In order to make the transition away from the traditional paper-based process and onto Civica Polling Station as smooth as possible for staff, with the May 2024 council elections approaching, CDC offered polling station teams the option on whether to join a trial. 58 out of the 108 polling stations involved decided to proceed. This included a wide user demographic, from Gen Z to baby boomers.

Managing polling day

CDC polling staff and volunteers took to the pilot well, while there was a seamless uptake among the general public. "People experience this kind of technology everywhere in day-to-day life", said Sarah Dalby, electoral services manager at CDC, "so the changeover went extremely smoothly among voters. This is great for citizen engagement."

The new approach also proved to be a useful tool for onboarding new staff. In this way, the use of modern technology and the digitisation of polling day processes stands to help attract a new generation to this role. Sarah continued: "There are a lot of manual systems and paperwork to get your head around when you start working at a polling station during an election. The pressure to do all of this and maintain accuracy throughout the day can be a little daunting for new starters. However, the digitised system removes all of this. To demonstrate this in action, we were even able to upskill a poll clerk to perform presiding officer duty for the first time in the latest by-election, which was largely thanks to the technology's support."

"This all helps with generational change. Our younger staff expect to use technology to take care of simple administrative tasks, so we are hoping to demonstrate through this pilot that we are a forward-thinking council and a great place to work."

Sarah Dalby – Electoral Services Manager at CDC

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Looking ahead

Due to its success, Civica Polling Station was also used in the following snap parliamentary general election across 37 out of 40 polling stations.

Rob Weaver said: "We want to continue to use and develop this system. In the short term, that means increasing the number of staff that feel comfortable to adopt it. We deliberately left it as optional for this pilot and will continue to ease our staff into it as they become more and more familiar with the software and the benefits it brings. I can see a time fast approaching when this technology will become the standard for any election.

"It provides us with assurances of accuracy, speed, and a reduction in paperwork and the associated costs. It also provides a full picture and live reporting of how our stations are operating throughout polling day and relieves pressures on our busy teams. This is valuable data that we simply couldn't capture effectively before. It will help us plan efficiently and maximise our resources."

Rob Weaver – Chief Executive at CDC

To find out more about Civica's electoral solutions, or to book a demo, click [here](#).