



## RESEARCH BRIEFING

# Perspectives on Multi-Member Ward Working

Andrew Morrison, Susan Reid  
and Claire Lightowler

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On 3 May 2007 the Scottish local government elections will, for the first time, be contested using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system. In Scotland, STV will result in the creation of large three or four member electoral wards across the country. These will replace the smaller, single-member wards that exist at present.

This research briefing highlights the key findings of research conducted into multi-member ward working by the Improvement Service. The research explores what the introduction of multi-member wards might mean for the day-to-day work of councillors and officials in Scotland by examining how multi-member wards operate in Wales, England, Ireland and New Zealand. The research is based on a review of the relevant literature and face-to-face or telephone interviews with 45 interviewees across the four countries, conducted between September and December 2006. Interviewees were based in a total of 10 councils. Councils were targeted for this research based on political control and composition, geographical and democratic profiles. Particular wards were chosen to ensure relationships between members from various political parties, and independents, were examined.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Where political parties are a feature of local government, STV can create intra as well as inter-party competition at the ward level, which results in a significant increase in councillors' workload.
- Inter-party co-operation at ward level is possible, but this becomes difficult in tense political situations.
- Personal differences can be a major hindrance to the development of co-operative relationships in multi-member wards.
- Interaction between members seems to be easier in close-knit communities, where longer-standing relationships have often developed.
- Decentralised political management structures seem to facilitate increased co-operation within and between wards, by giving a clear purpose and role for the ward.
- Protocols do exist to govern officer-member interaction in a multi-member environment, however, informal common practice is more likely to shape relations.
- No evidence of formal procedures and protocols governing relationships between councillors in multi-member wards was uncovered.
- Workload can be split both geographically and by specialism within the same ward.
- Where strategies for caseload sharing between ward members exist they tend to have been developed on an informal and ad hoc basis, and in England, Ireland and Wales caseload sharing tends only to be done within political parties.
- Where councillors work closely together there is evidence to suggest that they reduce duplication of case work, which can also result in a reduction in workload.
- Evidence from New Zealand also highlights that multi-member working can benefit both members and constituents
- The ability to be flexible and to build and maintain good working relationships is important in multi-member wards.

## Multi-Member Wards in Wales

In Wales there are twenty-two unitary authorities: three cities, nine counties and ten county boroughs. These 22 authorities are served by 1264 councillors, who are elected every four years using the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system. In Wales a large number of local government electoral districts are multi-member electoral areas elected through the FPTP system. In these districts electors can have as many votes as there are seats to be filled.

To explore Welsh multi-member wards 17 Councillors and Officials were interviewed from three Welsh Councils; Cardiff, Blaneau Gwent and Caerphilly. In addition interviews were conducted with representatives from the National Assembly for Wales, the Welsh Local Government Association and an academic from Cardiff University.

### KEY FINDINGS FROM WALES

- Inter-party co-operation at ward level is possible, but this becomes difficult in tense political situations.
- Personal differences can be a major hindrance to the development of co-operative relationships in multi-member wards.
- Interaction between members seems to be easier in close-knit communities, where longer-standing relationships have often developed.
- Officers are generally positive about multi-member working. They do not feel that these impact negatively on the work of councils.
- Protocols do exist to govern officer-member interaction in a multi-member environment, however, informal common practice is more likely to shape relations.

## Multi-Member Wards in England

A rather complicated system of local government has evolved in England over the years. At present, the country is split into nine different regions, although, of these, only London has any substantial amount of devolved power. Below these regions, there are significant variations in modes of governance, including Metropolitan counties and districts, Shire counties and districts, Unitary authorities and Greater London County and Borough. All local authority elections in England are held under the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system. However, in England many electoral districts are multi-member electoral areas, where electors can have as many votes as there are seats to be filled. Therefore, multi-member ward working in England is organised through the First Past the Post electoral system.

Given the differences that exist between the Scottish and English systems of local government, it was decided that various branches of English local government should be studied for this project. Therefore, a non-metropolitan district (East Herts

District Council), a London Borough (Waltham Forest Borough Council) and a unitary authority (Bracknell Forest Borough Council) were selected for further research.

This paper is largely based on interviewees with 15 councillors and officials from three councils, East Herts District Council, Waltham Forest Borough Council and Bracknell Forest Borough Council. In addition an interview was conducted with a representative from the Local Government Association.

### KEY FINDINGS FROM ENGLAND

- Co-operation between members from the same party seems to be common at ward level under First Past the Post (FPTP).
- Inter-party relationships tend to be characterised by little more than co-existence.
- The degree of co-operation that takes place at ward level is highly dependent on the political and personal differences that exist between members.
- Any strategies for caseload sharing between ward members seem to be developed on an informal and ad hoc basis.
- In general, both members and officers seem to be comfortable with the existence of multi-member wards, notwithstanding the potential for conflict that may exist.
- No evidence of procedures and protocols governing relationships between councillors in multi-member wards was found. However, examples of protocols used to cement relationships between officers and members in such environments were uncovered.

### Multi-Member Wards in Ireland

There is a three-tier system of local government in Ireland. The top tier consists of eight regional authorities, which have a monitoring role regarding the use of EU funds and also co-ordinate some of the activities undertaken by sub-county authorities. Underneath these are the country's thirty-four local authorities, which are 'regarded as the primary units of local government in Ireland and the mainline providers of services'.<sup>1</sup>

Members of the regional authorities are not directly elected but county, city, town and borough councillors are all elected by means of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of Proportional Representation (PR).

This case study is based on information gleaned from a review of relevant literature, including previous studies of multi-member wards in Ireland, and primary data obtained from telephone interviews with four elected members from Dublin City Council and Kildare County Council conducted in October 2006.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM IRELAND

- STV creates intra as well as inter-party competition at ward level. This seems to result in a significant increase in councillors' workload.
- The number of hung councils created under STV demands that some level of co-operation takes place between parties and this often translates to co-operation at ward level as well.
- Where councillors work closely together there is evidence to suggest that they reduce duplication. This could also result in a reduction in workload.
- Decentralised political management structures seem to facilitate increased co-operation within and between wards.
- There is no evidence of the use of protocols or procedures governing relationships within wards in Ireland. However, there is evidence of protocols governing how officers should deal with ward matters.

## Multi-Member Wards in New Zealand

Local government in New Zealand is a two-tier system made up of regional councils and territorial authorities (either city or district councils), which sit geographically within one of the regional council areas. Four of the territorial authorities are unitary authorities combining the powers of a territorial authority with those of regional councils. Individual councils are free to determine their own governance structure. In practice, this means that most operate a committee system with meetings every 4-6 weeks which then reports to full council for a final vote.

Prior to the introduction of the Local Electoral Act in 2001, local elections in New Zealand were conducted under the First Past the Post (FPTP) system. For election purposes, district and city councils were divided into wards with a mixture of single and multi-member wards being contested. The Local Electoral Act gave individual councils and their constituents the right to decide whether they would continue to use FPTP or whether they would move to a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. Ten local authorities changed from FPTP to STV for the 2004 elections, retaining the structure of both single and -multi-member wards.

New Zealand is similar to Scotland in that it has a mix of a few sizeable urban populations and large sparsely populated rural areas. This case study is based on a literature review and telephone interviews with three Councillors and one ex-Councillor from Marlborough District Council and Wellington City Councils, conducted in December 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Collins, N. and Quinlivan, A. (2006) 'Multi-level governance,' in Coakley, John and Gallagher, Michael eds. Politics in the Republic of Ireland, Routledge (London), p.387

## KEY FINDINGS FROM NEW ZEALAND

- Cooperation between ward councillors is the norm in New Zealand, probably because there is a lack of party politics at the local level.
- Cooperation can be beneficial to both constituents and elected members, and if it exists then multi-member wards can be better for the public and for councillors than single member wards.
- Cooperation may be easier in wards with less members.
- Constituents going to more than one councillor with a specific issue can be positive, it allows the constituent to hear different opinions.
- Workload can be split both geographically and by specialism within the same ward.
- There is no evidence of formal protocols or procedures governing multi-member ward working. In fact, opinion suggests that these could be unworkable and unhelpful.
- The ability to be flexible and to build and maintain good working relationships is important in multi-member wards.

## FINAL WORD

It is hoped that this research will inform preparations for multi-member ward working in Scotland and will offer some guidance for elected members and officials for how to make a success of multi-member ward working. If you have any questions or comments about this research or multi-member ward working please don't hesitate to contact the Research Team at [research@improvementservice.org.uk](mailto:research@improvementservice.org.uk)





Westerton House, Westerton Road  
East Mains Industrial Estate  
Broxburn EH52 5AU

**T.** 01506 775558

**F.** 01506 775566

**E.** [info@improvementservice.org.uk](mailto:info@improvementservice.org.uk)

[www.improvementservice.org.uk](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk)

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