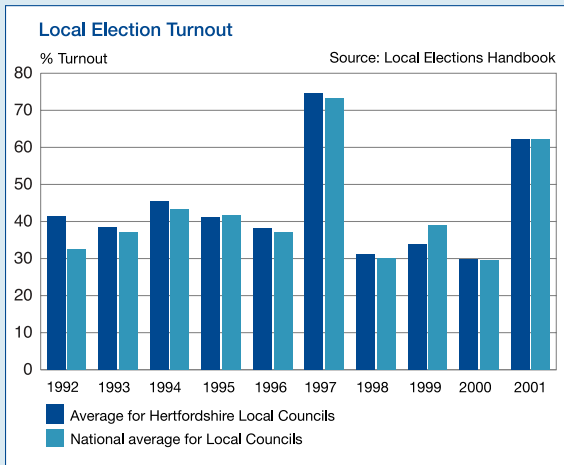


Involvement in Decision Making



To vote is to make a contribution to your community. Participation in local elections is a good indicator of community involvement and citizenship. Many policies that affect the communities we live in are influenced through voting. These can include issues such as energy use, transport, building development and council spending. A low turnout suggests a lack of awareness of local council activities and/or a lack of conviction that voting can make a difference.

INDICATOR DM1 – Electoral Turnout



Turnout at local elections is shown in the graph. In 2001 county council elections took place in Hertfordshire, but no district/borough council elections. Numbers were higher than the previous year because the national parliamentary elections were held on the same day. Compared to other national elections, the parliamentary election turnout in 2001 was very low at 59.4%.

Concern over low turnout at elections led to the production of the Modernising Local Government White Paper in 1998, refer to www.electoralcommission.org.uk. This proposed reviews to the traditional system of local government, election frequency and methods of voting. Over the last few years, in order to encourage more people to participate, changes have been considered to the way people can vote. To investigate these new

voting methods, two of the local authorities in Hertfordshire carried out pilot schemes for their May 2002 elections.

Stevenage Borough Council ran an all-postal voting pilot scheme across all wards in the borough. An information card was sent to households six weeks before the election date to explain the process, and then the ballot papers were posted nearly two weeks before. Residents could either post their ballot papers back or put them in a box in the council offices. The turnout achieved was significantly higher than in previous years and this method was cheaper to carry out than a traditional election.

The St Albans City and District Council pilot scheme offered voters from two wards a choice between postal voting, telephone voting, or voting electronically on the internet, at a kiosk in one of the traditional polling stations or a local supermarket. Instructions and voter security numbers were sent out to households before the election. Internet and telephone voting was available Thursday evening to Saturday evening before the election date. Voting at the kiosks was available on the Friday and Saturday. The pilot did not appear to persuade many more people to vote, and it was expensive. Voters were positive about the new methods but some did not realise they were unable to vote on Election Day.

Local Democracy Week was held in October 2002 aiming to raise awareness of council functions, improve communications and public participation. Local councils promoted it with activities such as competitions, exhibitions, surveys and leaflets. Other examples of promotion have been going on during the year to make sure everyone eligible to vote is registered. These activities included; telephone canvassing, offers of postal voting, newspaper and magazine articles, poster campaigns, focus groups and displays. Some councils have been working on changing the way they are controlled and their decision making processes to make these more efficient and accountable to local people.