
THE CYCLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN ENGLAND – CONSULTATION PAPER

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the main points in the Electoral Commission's consultation paper on the cycle of local government elections in England. Comments are invited on the following issues:
- should there be a more uniform approach to local government electoral cycles, if so, why and to what extent should local preferences be taken into account;
 - in areas with more than one tier of local government, should elections to different levels be combined, possibly with national and European elections in the future;
 - should the present four-year term of office for local councillors be retained and if not, why not.
- 1.2 Responses must be received by 3 October 2003. The Electoral Commission will consider all submissions before formulating options for change and their final report, including their recommendations will be submitted to the Deputy Prime Minister by 29 January 2004.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In January 2003 the Government invited the Electoral Commission, pursuant to section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, to review the cycle of local government elections in England and identify options for change that would simplify the current cycle. This review considers elections to principal local authorities (including mayoral elections), the Greater London Authority and parish councils.
- 2.2 In recommending any options for change, the Commission may also consider changes to councillors' terms of office, the number of councillors for local authority areas and the number and/or boundaries of wards or divisions for that area. The scope of the review does not include recommendations for changes to the voting system for local government in England.
- 2.3 The terms of reference specified by the Government's request to the Electoral Commission include consideration of the extent to which any options for change would:
- improve the democratic legitimacy and local accountability of councils;
 - enable greater understanding of when elections are to be held and their purpose;
 - be likely to improve participation in the electoral process;
 - help facilitate the effective management of local authorities; and
 - be facilitated by new ways of voting, including increased postal voting, electronic counting or multi channel e-voting.

3 CURRENT ARRANGEMENTS

3.1 The current cycle of local government elections in England is not consistent. Although all local councillors serve for four years, there is no clear pattern of elections:

- metropolitan boroughs elect by thirds each year;
- London boroughs have all-out elections every 4 years;
- shire districts may hold whole council elections, by thirds or by halves;
- county councils have all-out elections every four years;
- parish councils have elections every four years, in the same year as the principal authority ward in which they are located. Where elections to the principal authority are held by thirds, therefore, some parish council elections might be held in each of the three election years of the electoral cycle.

3.2 This means that electors in different areas of England may be able to vote between one and four times in each four-year electoral cycle, depending on the area in which they live.

3.3 In areas with two tiers of local government such as county council areas, elections to the different areas are currently staggered but may be combined with general elections, and the Government has recently proposed that the 2004 local elections should be combined with the European Parliamentary elections.

4 RESEARCH INFORMATION

4.1 Public perceptions

The results of an opinion poll carried out for the Commission by MORI in April 2003 indicate that there is widespread public confusion and lack of knowledge about when local elections in England are held. While three-quarters of respondents knew that there were elections in their area on 1 May 2003, fewer than one in five were able to name which council they were for. Also, nearly 30% did not know how often local elections were held in their area, and only 16% were able to identify correctly the actual cycle of local elections. However, despite this confusion, there appears to be broad satisfaction with the current frequency of local elections, with 71% of respondents feeling that it is “about right” and 64% expressing satisfaction with the current four year term of office for local councillors.

4.2 Participation

The Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre at Plymouth University has undertaken a statistical analysis of the relationship between the local electoral cycle and turnout at local government elections in England, which indicates that differences in turnout do exist between local authorities using alternative

electoral cycles. The research suggests that, in theory, turnout in areas with whole council elections could decline if they were to switch cycle, and could increase if areas with elections by thirds were to switch. The frequency of elections also appears to affect the level of participation, with marginally greater turnout in areas with less frequent elections. Local political competition can also help to enhance electoral turnout.

4.3 Performance

There does not appear to be a clear relationship between CPA ratings and local authority electoral cycles. A small number of CPA reports considered the impact of issues relating to the turnover of Council Members, changes in political composition and the effects of short-term or changeable decision-making.

5 OFFICER COMMENTS

5.1 The range of arguments for and against either partial or whole council elections is extensive and has been debated many times in recent years. Some of the main points are shown below, but it should be noted that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

5.2 For partial elections

- more opportunities for electors to exercise their right to vote;
- may result in more immediate political accountability;
- may provide more political continuity;
- may ensure that electoral administrators are more up-to-date and experienced in election law;
- familiarity with the process assists candidates and agents;
- may result in less by-elections.

5.3 For whole council elections

- less frequent elections may encourage greater participation;
- greater possibility of change in political control may encourage participation;
- may result in greater accountability of the authority as a whole;
- may encourage greater long-term planning by authorities and discourage continuous election campaigning;
- may be more cost effective both in terms of the cost of the election and in that, if differing elections were to be combined, an annual audit for the electoral register might not be needed if voting took place only every fourth year.

6 RECOMMENDATION

6.1 It is proposed that the Committee RESOLVES

To consider the Electoral Commission's consultation paper and make comments in response.

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Background Papers:

Electoral Commission Consultation paper entitled " The cycle of Local Government elections in England".

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