



**PORTFOLIO AREA: Health and Community Activities**

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Date of Meeting: 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2003

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Public

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Key Decision: No

Recorded in Forward Plan: No

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Outside Policy Framework

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**Title:** The Cycle of Local Government Elections in England

**Report of:** Head of Legal and Democratic Services

**Report reference:** LDS 52/03

**Summary:**

The Electoral Commission has issued a consultation paper on the cycle of local government elections in England. The review will consider elections to principal local authorities (including mayoral elections), the Greater London Authority and parish councils and identify options for change that would simplify the current cycle for recommendation to the Deputy Prime Minister. The Commission is seeking views on eight questions raised in the consultation paper by 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2003.

**Recommendations:**

Members are invited to respond to the Electoral Commission's consultation paper.

**Contact Officer:** David Mitchell

**Ext:** 7029

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Electoral Commission has published a consultation paper inviting views and evidence on eight specific questions to inform the Commission's review of the cycle of local government elections in England.
- 1.2 Responses to the consultation must be submitted by **Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> October**.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 In its white paper 'Strong local leadership – quality public services', published in 2001, the Government noted that

*The current cycle of local government elections is confusing. Some councils have elections once every four years while others have elections in three years out of four. It is too easy for electors to lose track of when elections are to be held or how many votes they have on any particular election day. And this arrangement can lessen the immediate impact of voters' behaviour on council control.*

- 2.2 In January 2003, the Government invited the Electoral Commission to review the cycle of elections in England and submit a report to the Deputy Prime Minister by 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2004. The review considers elections to principal local authorities (including mayoral elections), the Greater London Authority and parish councils and the Commission must assess the desirability and practicality of any options for change, and must also make recommendations for the implementation of those options.
- 2.3 In carrying out the review, the Commission must consider 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.
- 2.4 The Commission is also aware of the need to consider the relationship between different local government elections in related areas, and between local government elections and other elections in England (elections to the Westminster and European parliaments). The review will also provide an opportunity to consider in detail issues relating to the principle of the combination of elections.

2.5 In considering any options for change to the current cycle of local government elections in England, the Commission's recommendations may involve changes to

- Councillors' terms of office;
- Local authorities' electoral arrangements, including:
  - the number of councillors for the local authority area;
  - the boundaries of wards or divisions for the area;
  - the number of wards or divisions for the area.

### **3 The current local government electoral cycle**

#### Variations by type of authority

3.1 The current cycle of local government elections in England is by no means straightforward. Although all local councillors serve for four years, there is no clear or consistent pattern of elections:

- metropolitan borough authorities elect one third of their members each year;
- London boroughs elect all their members at once every four years;
- shire districts may hold either all whole council elections, elections by thirds or elections by halves;
- county councils elect all their members once every four years
- unitary authorities outside London and the metropolitan areas currently elect either by thirds or hold whole council elections every four years; and
- parish council elections take place every four years, in the same year as elections to the principal authority ward in which they are located.

#### Current legal requirements

3.2 The Local Government Act 2000 gave powers to the Secretary of State to introduce by Order schemes of elections for county councils, districts or London borough councils which would include whole council elections, elections by thirds or elections by halves. The Secretary of State may also, by Order, change the years in which elections take place for county councils, districts or London borough councils. Metropolitan districts must, however, hold elections by thirds. The electoral cycle of any new unitary authorities established as a consequence of the creation of Regional Assemblies in England would be specified in the appropriate statutory Orders establishing them.

### The frequency of local elections

- 3.3 The variation in the frequency of elections in different authorities also means that the frequency with which electors are given the opportunity to vote varies from area to area, depending on the number and type of local authorities in each area. Moreover, this disparity is also repeated *within* some local authority areas, where electors may be offered fewer or greater opportunities to vote depending on the size of the individual ward in which they live. For example, in two-tier areas where members are elected by thirds (such as the City Council's area), those electors in single-member wards may vote twice in each four-year cycle (once for their district ward and once for their county division), those in two-member wards may vote three times, while those in three-member wards may vote in all four years of the cycle.
- 3.4 One of the overall effects of these disparities in electoral cycle is that there is no consistent pattern to the scale of local elections from year to year. The number of authorities holding elections, wards or seats to be elected and electors eligible to vote can vary dramatically each year.

### **Consultation questions**

- Question 1** *Should there be a more uniform pattern of local government electoral cycles in England? If so, why?*
- Question 2** *To what extent should local preferences be taken into account when considering future arrangements for local government electoral cycles?*
- Question 3** *Should the current four-year term of office for local councillors be retained? If not, why?*

### Combination of local and other elections

- 3.5 In two-tier shire areas (e.g. Cumbria), elections to the different tiers are staggered – in shire districts which elect by thirds, county council elections are held in the fallow fourth year of the electoral cycle; in areas which hold whole council elections, the county elections are held in the second year following the district election.
- 3.6 In addition to the range of local authority elections in England, less frequent elections are also held for the Westminster parliament and the European parliament. In certain circumstances, these elections may be held at the same time as local government elections in England. Elections to the European parliament are held once every five years, generally in early June. Normally, then, these elections take place about a month after the ordinary local elections in May. The Government intends to move the date of the local elections next year in order to combine them with the European elections on 10<sup>th</sup> June.
- 3.7 General elections to the Westminster parliament are not required to be held on a specified frequency but must take place at least every five years and may be held on the same day as local elections. The parliamentary elections in 1997 and 2001, for example, were combined with county council elections.

## Consultation questions

**Question 4** *In areas with more than one tier of local government, should elections to different levels continue to be staggered, or held at the same time? Why?*

**Question 5** *In developing options for change to the current local government electoral cycle, should the Electoral Commission consider the possible future combination of local government elections in England with other national or European elections? If so, why?*

## 4 Evidence

### Public perceptions

- 4.1 The results of an opinion survey 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 were able to identify correctly whether there were elections in their area on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003, fewer than one in five were able to actually name which council they were for. More than half of respondents incorrectly identified how often local elections were held in their area, while 32% did not know. There was broad support for moves to harmonise electoral cycles across England, although still some broad support for retaining some variations according to local circumstances.

### Participation

- 4.2 The Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth undertook 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 local authorities 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 with which electors are invited to vote also appears to affect the level of participation, with marginally greater turnout in areas where electors are given less frequent opportunities to vote.

### Performance

- 4.3 The Commission has also been asked to consider the extent to which the local electoral cycle may facilitate the effective management of local authorities, and notes that there does not appear to be a clear relationship between Comprehensive Performance Assessment ratings and local electoral cycles. CPA reports make it clear that a broad range of structural or political factors may influence the capacity of local authorities to deliver their responsibilities, and it is not clear that the electoral cycle of local authorities has been a significant factor in these assessments. It appears that different local authority types share the capacity to deliver services well, regardless of the cycle of elections, and equally that authorities which share the same electoral cycle may be awarded different ratings, across the range of CPA assessment categories.

## Consultation question

**Question 6** *Do you have any comments or further evidence on the evidence which the Commission has gathered? In particular, the Commission would value any practical experience or local examples of the issues discussed.*

## 5 The case for and against partial or whole council elections

5.1 The range of arguments for and against either partial or whole council elections is extensive, and this debate has been rehearsed and refined on many occasions in recent years. In summary, the Commission has identified a number of arguments for either cycle, as follows:

### For partial elections (thirds or halves)

- more frequent opportunities for electors to exercise their right to vote;
- may facilitate sharper and more immediate political accountability;
- may tend to produce less drastic changes in political direction, and provide greater political continuity;
- can ensure that the political composition of authorities more accurately reflects the current political complexion of local areas;
- may reduce the likelihood that the timing of important or controversial decisions are distorted by the timing of elections;
- may be easier for parties to field candidates.

### For whole council elections

- turnout likely to be higher;
- greater possibility of wholesale change in control may encourage participation;
- too-frequent elections might dilute public interest;
- opportunity for all electors in an area to influence the composition of the authority at the same time (in authorities which elect by thirds, only those in 3-member wards have an opportunity to vote annually);
- may tend to encourage greater long-term planning by authorities, and discourage continuous election campaigning;
- may be cheaper both for local authorities and for local political parties and groups.

## Consultation questions

**Question 7** *In addition to the arguments outlined above, are there any other relevant issues which the Commission should take into account?*

**Question 8** *In considering the simplification of the local government electoral cycle, which issues or arguments are the most important? Why?*

## 6 Conclusion

Members are invited to respond to the Electoral Commission's consultation paper.