

January 2004

The  
Electoral  
Commission

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a red shirt, looking down at a white envelope she is holding. The background is a blurred indoor setting. In the foreground, a dark surface with the word 'BALLOT' printed on it is visible.

# The cycle of local government elections in England

Report and recommendations

## The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

On 1 April 2002, The Boundary Committee for England (formerly the Local Government Commission for England) became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission. Its duties include reviewing local electoral boundaries.

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# Executive summary

Following a request made under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) in January 2003, this report to the Deputy Prime Minister contains the findings of The Electoral Commission's review of the cycle of local government elections in England, and its recommendations for change to simplify the current cycle.

On 28 January 2003, The Electoral Commission received a formal request from the Deputy Prime Minister to 'review and submit a report to him on the cycle of local government elections in England, identifying options for change that would simplify the current cycle'. The Commission was also required to assess the desirability and practicality of any options for change, and make recommendations for the implementation of those options.

We published an evidence and consultation paper in July 2003, summarising the findings of research on public attitudes and awareness, electoral turnout and local authority performance, and seeking views on a range of questions. We received a total of 269 submissions to our consultation paper and attended a number of meetings to discuss issues in more detail.

## Simplification and change

The current pattern of local electoral cycles in England is unclear and inconsistent, both between and within local authority types. There are wide variations in the opportunities available to electors to participate in local elections, depending on the area in which they live. This disjointed and inconsistent pattern of local electoral cycles has come about as a result of historical accident, and the piecemeal approach to structural change in local government during the past 30 years.

The apparent disparities and contradictions of the current pattern of electoral cycles are not, in themselves, of particular concern to us. However, our research has found significant evidence of confusion and misunderstanding which suggests that many electors simply do not know when or why local elections are held in their area. We are concerned that the complex current pattern of different local electoral cycles across England does not help electors to understand the opportunities open to them for participation in the democratic process.

We are also concerned that opportunities for access to the local democratic process should be equitable. It is fundamentally unfair and, in our view, unacceptable that within an individual local authority some electors may

have fewer opportunities to vote and influence the political composition of the authority than their neighbours in a different ward. It is clear that the current pattern of local government elections in England does not provide equal access to the democratic process for all electors, particularly in areas with partial council elections.

We consider that the pattern of local electoral cycles in England is unnecessarily complex and confusing, and that there is a strong case for simplification of the current arrangements. We note the important debate on the merits of diversity of practice in local government. However, we can see no good reason why one of the fundamental elements of local democracy should vary from area to area.

The Commission recommends that the cycle of local and sub-national government elections in England should follow a clear and consistent pattern, within and across local authorities. Individual authorities should not be permitted to 'opt out' of this pattern, and any newly created authorities should also follow the same pattern.

## Recommendations for the local electoral cycle in England

Responses to our consultation underlined many of the arguments surrounding the debate for and against either whole council or partial elections. However, we received little new information or evidence to support respondents' positions. While we have sympathy with many of these arguments, the balance of evidence that we have considered suggests that whole council elections are more likely to provide clarity for electors and a degree of stability for local authorities.

We also consider that a key principle for the electoral cycle of local authorities should be to ensure that all electors are given the same opportunities for participation in the local democratic process. A more equitable pattern of electoral arrangements under elections by thirds would require a uniform pattern of three-member wards across authorities, or a uniform pattern of two-member wards with biennial elections.

Whole council elections would require no change to local authorities' current electoral arrangements.

However, The Boundary Committee for England has noted that the requirement to recommend a uniform pattern of three-member wards in metropolitan borough areas has caused specific difficulties when attempting to reflect community identities in some authorities. The Committee notes that the flexibility to recommend single-, two- or three-member wards enables it to more easily reflect local communities while continuing to provide good levels of electoral equality. Under a pattern of whole council elections, authorities would not be restricted to any particular ward size, since the entire electorate would be eligible to vote together once every four years.

Having taken into account the evidence and arguments presented during our consultation process, we have concluded that a pattern of whole council elections for all local authorities in England would provide a clear, equitable and easy to understand electoral process that would best serve the interests of local government electors.

The Commission recommends that each local authority in England should hold whole council elections, with all councillors elected simultaneously, once every four years.

## Implementation

Our proposals for the implementation of our recommendations attempt to balance the need for a pragmatic approach to change with our desire to see timely reform of the local electoral cycle in England.

We considered several options for the implementation of our recommendations for change, and rejected an option under which all local government elections would take place in the same year. We considered that this proposal would diminish the important distinction between different local government elections taking place in the same area, and between the roles and responsibilities of local and sub-national government where it exists.

Our preferred approach to the implementation of our recommendation would balance simplicity and a

national focus on local government issues, with a clear distinction between different tiers of local or sub-national government. Under our recommendation all local government electors in England would have the opportunity to vote for their district, metropolitan borough, London borough or unitary council in the first year of the electoral cycle. Those electors in areas with other local or sub-national authorities would vote again two years later.

The Commission recommends that all local government electors in England should elect members of their district, metropolitan borough, London borough or unitary council simultaneously once every four years. Two years later, in the mid-point of the electoral cycle, electors in areas with county councils, city-wide authorities or any future sub-national government should elect representatives to those bodies.

If the recommendations of this review are accepted by Government and Parliament, we will work with central and local government partners to identify the most appropriate approach to timely implementation.

# 1 Introduction

Following a request made under section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) in January 2003, this report to the Deputy Prime Minister contains the findings of The Electoral Commission's review of the cycle of local government elections in England, and its recommendations for change to simplify the current cycle.

## Background

1.1 In its white paper *Strong local leadership – quality public services*,<sup>1</sup> published in December 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.

1.2 The Government went on to indicate in the white paper that it proposed to invite The Electoral Commission to review and recommend options to simplify the current cycle of local elections.

## Request

1.3 Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), which established The Electoral Commission, the Secretary of State may request the Commission to review and report on any matter specified by him.<sup>2</sup> On 28 January 2003, the Commission received a formal request from the Deputy Prime Minister, pursuant to section 6(2) of PERA, to:

review and submit a report to him on the cycle of local government elections in England, identifying options for change that would simplify the current cycle.

Under the terms of the request, the Commission has also been required to assess the desirability and practicality of any options for change, and make recommendations for the implementation of these options.

1.4 The request specified that the Commission's report must be submitted to the Deputy Prime Minister no later than 12 months after the date of the request. It also outlined the scope and terms of reference to be considered by the Commission in its review. The full text of the request is included in Appendix 1 to this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Cm 5237.

<sup>2</sup> Section 6(2) Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.



## Scope and terms of reference

1.5 In undertaking this review, The Electoral Commission has carefully considered the scope and terms of reference that were outlined in the request submitted by the Deputy Prime Minister. Under the terms of the request, the Commission's report on the cycle of local government elections in England must include consideration of the normal elections for:

- principal authorities – districts (including unitary authorities and metropolitan boroughs), London boroughs and counties;
- the Greater London Authority (GLA);
- elected mayors; and
- parish councils.

1.6 While the terms of the request specify elections to the GLA, we have also considered it appropriate to take into account elections to potential future levels of sub-national government as well as any existing bodies.

1.7 In considering any options for change to the current cycle of local government elections, the Commission's recommendations might involve changes to:

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

1.8 The Government's request also specified a range of matters to which the Commission must have regard in carrying out this review. These included, but were not limited to, 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.

1.9 The Commission was also required to consider the relationship between different local government elections in related areas, and between local government elections and other elections in England (i.e., elections to the Westminster and European parliaments).

## The Electoral Commission

1.10 This review has been carried out under the guidance of a project board including Sam Younger, Chairman of The Electoral Commission, Pamela Gordon, Commissioner and Chair of The Boundary Committee for England, and two Deputy Electoral Commissioners, Joan Jones CBE and Professor Michael Clarke CBE. However, the views presented in this report are those of The Electoral Commission alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of project board members or others who have contributed to the review process.

# 2 Review process

From the outset of this review we have recognised that it was likely to provoke both interest and controversy, among the local government community in particular. We also acknowledged that there might be no straightforward 'right' answer to the issues involved. We have been especially keen to ensure that our recommendations are based on objective evidence, and that we have consulted widely.

## Evidence

**2.1** We noted at the outset of this review the importance of gathering objective evidence to complement the valuable views of stakeholders and consultation respondents. In particular, we were eager to gauge the views of the electorate, including both voters and non-voters. We asked MORI to undertake public survey research that would not simply explore electors' views and attitudes on the frequency of local elections in England, but would also explore in some depth their understanding and awareness of opportunities to vote in their local area.

**2.2** The initial survey results provided a broad impression of perceptions of local government electoral arrangements. However, at the analysis stage, the answers given by respondents about their perceptions of local government elections were compared with details of the electoral cycle and arrangements in their area, to give a measure of levels of actual understanding and awareness. We summarised the key findings of this public perceptions study in our consultation paper, and the full text of the report from MORI has been made available to download on our website. The results of the study are discussed in more detail in chapter 3 of this report.

**2.3** We also asked the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, to undertake a statistical analysis of the relationship between local government electoral cycles and turnout. Drawing on data from their historical database of local election results from the past 30 years, the Elections Centre was able to provide an assessment of the specific impact of the cycle or frequency of elections on turnout at local government elections. Again, the full text of the Elections Centre's report was made available to download on our website.

**2.4** Finally, we undertook our own consideration of the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) outcomes, to ascertain whether there were any discernible links between performance and different forms of electoral cycles. Our conclusions were included in the consultation paper published in July 2003.

## Consultation

**2.5** At the beginning of July 2003, we issued a consultation paper that brought together evidence on a range of issues, as detailed above, and sought views and comments on a number of questions. The paper was sent to the Chief Executives and Leaders of all local authorities in England, and to all local authority electoral services managers. It was also sent to a range of relevant local government stakeholders, including local authority members and officers, political parties and representative organisations including the Local Government Association (LGA), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). The paper was also available to download on our website. We sought comments on the questions and issues raised in the consultation paper by the beginning of October 2003.

**2.6** In our consultation paper we also issued an open invitation to individuals or groups to contact us and arrange to meet the project team to discuss issues relating to the review. During the consultation period, we held or attended 17 such meetings, detailed in Appendix 2.

## Responses to consultation

**2.7** During the consultation period we received a total of 269 responses by post or email, from a wide range of organisations and individuals, primarily within the local government community. A total of 143 local authorities and 16 local parish or town councils responded, and we also received individual responses from 20 local councillors and eight local authority officers. Nine registered political parties submitted responses, and we also received comments from seven MPs, three members of the House of Lords and 34 local political groups. We received further comments from 11 individual respondents, two academics and a total of 16 other organisations or groups. A full list of respondents is included in Appendix 2 of this report. Copies of all non-confidential responses can be viewed at our office.

**2.8** Responses ranged in depth from detailed consideration of each of the questions and issues raised in the consultation paper, to a broad outline of respondents' positions. We greatly appreciate the input of those who took part in our consultation exercise, and we value the experience and expertise that respondents have been able to bring to this review. We have also found it particularly useful to meet interested groups in person during the consultation period, to gauge the strength of feeling on the issues involved and discuss them in more detail.

## Next steps

**2.9** This report sets out The Electoral Commission's recommendations to the Deputy Prime Minister for changes to the local government electoral cycle in England, as required by his request. The Commission recognises that its role in relation to electoral law is advisory, and it is not for the Commission to make the final determination as to how local government electoral cycles might be changed. It is for the Government to initiate, and ultimately for Parliament to decide on any proposals for legislative change.

**2.10** Nevertheless, we feel strongly that reform to simplify the local electoral cycle in England is overdue, and we would urge the Government to take forward the recommendations contained in this report at the earliest opportunity. Chapter 5 of this report outlines some suggested options for the implementation of our recommendations, and we will continue to work with the Government to ensure that timely progress towards reform is made.



# 3 Simplification and change

In looking at the cycle of local government elections in England we have been asked to identify options for change that would simplify the current cycle. Our priority has been to identify a pattern of local elections that best serves the democratic and community interests of electors.

## Current arrangements

**3.1** In our consultation paper, we examined in detail the current cycle of local government elections in England. We found the current pattern to be unclear and inconsistent, both within and between local authority types, and noted that there are wide variations in the range of opportunities available to electors to participate in local elections, depending on the area in which they live.

**3.2** As shown in Table 1 below, a total of 137 authorities currently elect by thirds, with one-third of members retiring each year and their seats up for fresh election. Seven authorities elect by halves, while 243 hold whole council elections once every four years. All metropolitan boroughs currently have a uniform pattern of three-member wards, while district, unitary and London councils may have between one and three members per ward. County councils may have either one or two members per division, but the large majority of divisions are represented by only one councillor.

**Table 1: summary of local government electoral cycle in England, by authority type**

Authority type	Thirds	Halves	Whole	Total
County council	-	-	34	34
District/borough council	82	7	149	238
Unitary council	19	-	27	46
London borough	-	-	33	33
Metropolitan borough	36	-	-	36
Parish and town councils	-	-	8,700	8,700

**3.3** At present there is no clear pattern of electoral cycle for local authorities in England, and the frequency with which authorities elect their members varies considerably from one area to another. In practice, this 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. Electors in London may vote twice in each four-year electoral cycle (in borough and Greater London Authority elections), while those living in metropolitan borough areas can vote three times during the same period.

All electors in two-tier areas can vote in county council elections once every four years, but elections to shire districts may take place in each of the three years in-between county elections.

**3.4** Moreover, this disparity is also repeated within many local authority areas, where electors may be offered fewer or greater opportunities to vote for the same authority depending on the size of the individual ward in which they live. In unitary authorities that hold whole council elections every four years, all electors will be given the opportunity to vote once in each four-year electoral cycle. However, in those unitary authorities where members are elected by thirds, electors in single-member wards may vote only once in a four-year cycle, those in two-member wards may vote twice, and those in three-member wards may vote three times, with one year fallow.

**3.5** In two-tier shire areas, all electors can vote in county council elections once every four years. Electors in districts that hold whole council elections can also vote in the third year of the electoral cycle. However, in districts where members are elected by thirds, electors in single-member wards may vote twice in each four-year cycle (once for their district or borough ward and once for their county division), while their neighbours in two-member wards may vote three times, and those in three-member wards may vote in all four years of the cycle. In the small number of districts that elect by halves, all electors will be able to vote in three out of four years.

**3.6** 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 changes each year, and in recent elections, the proportion of the total local government electorate eligible to vote has varied significantly. In 1999 and 2003, when elections were held in all metropolitan boroughs and shire districts, around 80% of the total local government electorate were eligible to vote. In local elections in 1996 and 2000, however, less than half of the total electorate were eligible to vote.

While there were no borough elections in London in 2000, more than five million electors were able to vote in elections to the GLA.

**3.7** This disjointed and inconsistent pattern of local electoral cycles has come about as a result of historical accident and the piecemeal approach to structural change in local government during the past 30 years. Where such change has taken place, from the large-scale reorganisation in the early 1970s to more recent structural reviews in the mid 1990s, it appears that little consideration has been given to the overall national impact of decisions on individual local authority electoral cycles. Government has continued to emphasise the importance of local choice of electoral cycle for non-metropolitan districts, and in particular rejected the recommendation of the 1986 Widdicombe Committee report on the conduct of local government for a uniform system of local government elections.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on local choice has led to a patchwork pattern of electoral cycles across England, and each new phase of reorganisation has not only left these discrepancies unaddressed, but in many cases has added to the overall picture of inconsistency.

## Issues

**3.8** The apparent disparities and contradictions of the current pattern of electoral cycles are not, in themselves, of particular concern to us. This review was not intended to be an exercise in electoral tidiness. Rather, we have considered the problems and difficulties for electors that may be a direct consequence of this complexity and inconsistency. The evidence we have gathered suggests that the majority of electors simply do not know when, why or for which authority local elections are held in their area, and we are concerned that the complex current pattern of local electoral cycles may not encourage understanding of democratic opportunities across England.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business* (1986) Cmnd 9797.

**3.9** The study of public awareness that MORI carried out for us revealed a mixed picture of levels of understanding of the local electoral cycle among electors. Overall, a total of 77% of respondents knew whether or not there were local elections taking place in their area in May 2003. However, while some 84% of respondents in areas where elections were due to take place knew that they would have the opportunity to vote, one-sixth of the electorate were potentially disenfranchised – whether they wanted to vote or not – simply by being ill-informed or unaware of the elections taking place. In a similar study from 2002, MORI found that nearly a quarter of those in areas with elections were unaware that elections were taking place.<sup>4</sup> Younger respondents were significantly more likely to say they didn't know whether local elections would be held in their area (34% of respondents aged 15 to 24 compared with only 10% of those aged 25 plus). Respondents from black and minority ethnic communities were three times less likely than white respondents to be able to give an answer (12% compared with 39%).

**3.10** Many respondents who thought there were local elections in their area actually had little understanding of which authority the elections were actually for. Nearly one in five respondents overall (19%) did not know which authority they would be voting for in May 2003. Although county council elections were not held in May, 15% of respondents in shire district areas thought elections would be held for the county council. Some 12% of respondents in metropolitan borough areas and 21% in unitary authority areas, where there is no second tier of local government, were under the impression that elections were for county councils, although this may also demonstrate some lack of understanding of local government terminology. More positively, two-thirds of respondents in shire district areas (66%) correctly identified that the forthcoming elections were for their district or borough council.

**3.11** There was also widespread confusion and a lack of understanding about exactly how often electors have the

opportunity to vote in different areas of England. Nearly one-third of all respondents (30%) conceded that they did not know how often elections were held in their area, and only 16% overall were able to correctly identify the actual cycle of local elections. When other responses were compared with the actual frequency of elections at a ward level, it appears that the varied pattern of electoral cycle across England may have a particular effect on levels of awareness and understanding. Respondents in wards where elections were held either annually or only once every four years were most likely to answer correctly (34% and 30% respectively). However, only 5% of respondents in areas with elections in three years out of four answered correctly, and they were actually more likely to think that elections are held every year (37%). Respondents in areas with elections in two out of four years were also more likely to think that elections were held only once every four years.

**3.12** Attitudes towards change to the electoral cycle were mixed – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the generally poor level of awareness of the local government electoral cycle. Seventy-one per cent of respondents felt that the frequency of local elections in their area was 'about right', although one in five (19%) were unable to express a view. MORI found slightly more support among respondents for proposals to hold all local elections at the same time (53%) than for allowing the frequency of elections to vary locally (45%).

### Change and local diversity

**3.13** Respondents to our consultation paper were divided in their views as to the merits or desirability of a more uniform pattern of local electoral cycle. While many accepted the potential benefits to voter awareness and understanding of simplifications to the current cycle, others resented perceived interference from the centre in what they view as a matter for local choice.

**3.14** Many responses dealt in limited terms with the benefits or disadvantages of individual local electoral cycles, and did not take into account the wider picture of a nationwide pattern of elections. These respondents disagreed that confusion and low public awareness of

<sup>4</sup> MORI Social Research Institute survey for Green Issues Communications (2002), *Many Councillors 'Divorced' from the Electorate*.

local elections is a particular problem in their own area, if not nationally. While they maintained that local electors did understand when elections were held, the evidence of consistently low electoral turnouts across local government and the results of our opinion research work suggest that this view may be somewhat optimistic. Other respondents saw benefit in a more consistent pattern of local electoral cycles, but felt that the cycle in their own areas should be retained, and that other authorities should follow their example.

**3.15** A majority of respondents, however, accepted that a more uniform pattern of local electoral cycles would be beneficial, even if it would involve change to their own local arrangements. Many agreed that a clearer and more predictable local election cycle would help electors to understand when elections take place. Others noted the importance of consistency, both within and across local authorities, in ensuring that all electors have the same rights and opportunities to vote. Respondents also placed great value on the potential of a consistent local election pattern across England to help develop a 'national voting habit', which would promote local democratic renewal and civic responsibility by highlighting opportunities for democratic input. Certainly, it was noted that a nationally applicable pattern of local elections, whether every year, every other year or every four years, would enable a greater collective national focus on local government issues.

**3.16** We recognise that there is some opposition among local government stakeholders to the imposition of change, and in particular the imposition of uniformity, from above. Some respondents to our consultation paper argued that local choice of electoral cycle is both important and useful, and that what works well in some areas may work less well in others. These respondents reject the notion that a single electoral cycle would be suitable for all local authorities, and argue that flexibility of choice at a local level is necessary to respond to diverse local needs and circumstances. They also suggest that local elected representatives are best placed to decide which pattern is most suitable for their area.

**3.17** One respondent noted that 'uniformity involves change in at least some local authorities, and the costs of change have to be balanced against any assumed benefits', and argued that change 'should only be undertaken for strong reasons and not because uniformity is seen as inherently desirable.' As we have discussed earlier, we do not see a consistent pattern of local electoral cycles as necessarily desirable in its own right. Rather, we recognise the significant benefits to wider public understanding and awareness of democratic rights that a more consistent pattern would bring.

### The need for clarity

**3.18** It is of fundamental importance to the future health and relevance of local government, especially in the context of continued low turnout at local elections, that the electoral system is clear and easily understood by the public. Well-informed electors who understand how and when to vote are better placed to hold their local representatives to account, while confusion about when and why elections take place can only serve to further distance electors from local democracy. We would echo the conclusion of the Widdicombe Committee report that 'a system which is as complex and inconsistent as the present one is hardly calculated to encourage electoral participation'.

**3.19** The current pattern of local government electoral cycles in England, with considerable diversity between and within local authorities, appears to be well supported by many of those within local government. Locally determined arrangements suit those with established interests who may have worked with particular arrangements for a considerable length of time, and understand how best to work within local political processes. It is clear, however, that these arrangements work less well for voters, who do not understand how and when they are entitled to take part in the democratic process. As we have noted above, there is widespread confusion and misunderstanding among electors about when and why local elections are held in their own immediate area.



## The need for consistency

**3.20** In its report, the Widdicombe Committee suggested that citizens had a reasonable expectation that when they moved from one area to another electoral arrangements should be the same, unless there was a clear case to the contrary. We would add that a more consistent pattern of local electoral cycles in England would also help to encourage the development of a broader, deeper collective understanding of local elections as an event across the country. It would enable a clearer national focus on the wider roles and responsibilities of local government, while also highlighting the particular issues at stake at a local level. While greater consistency would enable nationwide voter awareness campaigns to the benefit of all electors, it would also provide an opportunity for targeted campaigns to address more effectively particular groups who may be less likely to participate.

**3.21** A further strong theme among responses to our consultation has been a recognition of the importance of ensuring fairness and equity in electoral arrangements. In addition to greater national consistency of electoral cycle, opportunities for access to the democratic process locally should be consistent and equitable – that is, all electors within each individual authority should have the same opportunities to influence the outcome of local elections and the policies of the authority. It is clear that the current pattern of local government elections in England does not provide equal access to the democratic process for electors at the local level.

**3.22** As we have noted earlier in this chapter, many authorities that elect by thirds, outside the metropolitan borough areas, do not have a uniform pattern of three-member wards. In these areas electors may be offered fewer or greater opportunities to vote for the same authority depending on the size of the individual ward in which they live. Some electors may have three opportunities to vote in elections to their local authority within a four-year period, while others can vote only once in the same period. It is fundamentally unfair and, in our view, unacceptable that within an individual local authority some electors should have fewer opportunities

to vote and influence the political composition of the authority than their neighbours in a different ward.

**3.23** A more consistent and clearly understandable pattern of local electoral cycles across England should also seek to ensure greater equity in access to the democratic process at a local level. Equality of opportunity to vote within local authorities under current warding arrangements could be achieved if all electors were to vote at the same time, once every four years. Correspondingly, a consistent pattern of elections by thirds or halves would require a move to a uniform pattern of three- or two-member wards respectively, involving significant changes to local electoral arrangements across England.

## Recommendation

**3.24** We have outlined above our concern that the current mixed pattern of local electoral cycles in England provides an unclear and inconsistent picture to voters which, at the very least, does not help to encourage participation in the democratic process at a local level. We have also noted that some electors within individual authorities may have fewer opportunities to vote and influence the political composition of the authority than their neighbours in a different ward. We have highlighted the benefits that greater clarity and consistency could bring in both these areas. In our view, this review presents an opportunity to think strategically about a future pattern of local electoral cycles which will better serve the interests and needs of electors across England.

**3.25** If we were starting afresh in planning a pattern of electoral cycles for local government in England, we would not wish to replicate existing arrangements. We must, of course, accept that we are not starting from scratch in this instance, and we have considered the most appropriate way forward in light of existing circumstances. Nevertheless, we consider that the current pattern of local electoral cycles in England is unnecessarily complex and confusing, and that there is a strong case for simplification of the current arrangements.

**3.26** We note the important debate on the merits of diversity of practice in local government. While we accept that local choice and diversity of practice may be valuable in many areas of local government, we do not believe that the case for local choice has been made in relation to local authorities' electoral cycles. Local authorities may choose to deliver their services or scrutinise decisions in a variety of ways, and electors will pass judgment on their achievements through the democratic process. However, we can see no good reason why one of the fundamental elements of local democracy should vary from area to area. It would not be acceptable, for example, to have a locally determined and varying franchise or terms of office for councillors. Moreover, we note that local government elections in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and in the majority of comparable Western democracies follow nationally consistent patterns in electing their members, and diversity in local practice has not extended to choice of electoral cycle.<sup>5</sup>

**3.27** On balance, and most importantly when viewed against the substantial evidence of confusion and misunderstanding among electors, we consider that the democratic needs of electors across England would be better met by a clearer and more consistent pattern of local electoral cycles.

The Commission recommends that the cycle of local and sub-national government elections in England should follow a clear and consistent pattern, within and across local authorities. Individual authorities should not be permitted to 'opt out' of this pattern, and any newly created authorities should also follow the same pattern.

**3.28** Our recommendation for the pattern of local electoral cycles in England follows in chapter 4.

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<sup>5</sup> New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the Republic of Ireland, France, Spain, Denmark and the Netherlands, for example, all have consistent patterns of local electoral cycles. For more information, see *The constitutional status of local government in other countries* prepared for the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament in 1998.

# 4 Recommendations for the cycle of local authorities in England

We have recommended that the cycle of local government elections in England should follow a clearer and more consistent pattern, within and across local authorities. However, we recognise that there is considerable disagreement about the relative benefits of the various local electoral cycles currently adopted by local authorities.

**4.1** In our consultation paper we outlined in some detail the range of arguments surrounding the debate for and against either whole council or partial elections. Responses to our consultation echoed and underlined many of these arguments, but we received little new information or evidence to support respondents' positions. Many responses drew heavily on evidence of local experiences, and often reflected individual preferences for retaining existing local electoral cycles.

**4.2** Following our recommendation for a consistent pattern of local electoral cycles in England, we have also considered options for the most appropriate cycle. We have carefully considered the arguments and evidence submitted to us during the consultation period. The range of matters to which we have been required to have regard in making this recommendation are outlined in the introduction of this report and reproduced in full in Appendix 1.

## Priorities

**4.3** In previous work The Electoral Commission has outlined its priorities in relation to the reform of electoral procedures and law. It aims to place the voter at the centre of its concerns, but also recognises the need to encourage the participation of a wide range of candidates and political parties and to ensure that electoral arrangements can be effectively and efficiently administered.

**4.4** These priorities have remained highly relevant in our consideration of the local electoral cycle in England – above all, we have sought to ensure that the democratic needs of electors are addressed appropriately. However, we recognise that other individuals, groups and organisations are essential to the continued health of local democracy, and it is clear that other issues must also be considered. One respondent usefully summarised the need for a balanced view:

It is important to ensure that the frequency of elections does not adversely affect the ability of any local authority to effectively manage and deliver their responsibilities, whilst at the same time maintaining the ability of the electorate to have adequate opportunity to influence the political control of the authority.

**4.5** We have sought primarily to identify a pattern of local electoral cycles that is likely to be well understood by the public and encourage their participation in elections. However, our recommendations should also give elected members confidence that they have a legitimate democratic mandate to act on behalf of their communities, and assure these communities that they can effectively hold their representatives to account. Any proposals for change must also recognise the need to support local authorities in the effective and efficient management and delivery of services to local communities.

**4.6** As we noted in our consultation paper, we recognise that a single 'correct' solution, which satisfies all of the concerns raised by stakeholders, is unlikely to exist. We have given a balanced consideration to the merits of each pattern of electoral cycles, and have assessed the evidence available to us against the range of criteria specified by the Secretary of State.

## Democratic legitimacy and local accountability

**4.7** Local authorities in England derive democratic legitimacy from the regular election of their members by the communities that they serve. Once elected, local representatives are held to account for the decisions they have made on behalf of their communities through re-election.

**4.8** Supporters of partial elections argue that electing half or a third of an authority's members in rotation can help to ensure that the composition of the council better reflects the political complexion of the electorate, and that more frequent elections can provide sharper accountability by keeping representatives 'on their toes'. Whole council elections, on the other hand, ensure that all eligible electors in the authority area have the opportunity to influence the political composition and control of the authority at the same time.

**4.9** Supporters of whole council elections also note that, particularly in the case of elections by thirds, when fewer than half the seats are up for election, overall political control of the authority may not change, even if the ruling party loses all the seats contested at a particular election. Similarly, in areas with partial elections but no uniform pattern of members per ward, electors may be confused or disaffected if control of the council changes as the result of an election in which they were not able to participate.

**4.10** Opponents of whole council elections express concern that important but controversial decisions may be postponed for political reasons until after an election, giving electors no opportunity for democratic protest for three years. On the other hand, elections of the whole council can give the ruling group the opportunity of a clear four-year period within which it can fulfil its manifesto promises before being judged on its policies and performance, including the setting of council tax.

**4.11** Responses to our consultation paper underlined these arguments. Those who have experience of working with authorities that hold whole council elections value the clear mandate and legitimacy they provide. In contrast, other respondents from areas that elect by thirds placed particular emphasis on the importance of continued close contact and responsiveness to electors. However, respondents were largely unable to supplement their arguments with clear objective evidence of the practical benefits to electors of either system.

**4.12** The arguments for and against whole council or partial elections have been well rehearsed by local government stakeholders, and we accept that many of them have some apparent merit. However, as we have discussed previously, there is a clear need for more consistent and equitable opportunities for local democratic accountability within authorities. In particular, the cycle of local elections should allow all electors within each individual authority to vote at the same time. A more equitable pattern of electoral arrangements under elections by thirds would require a uniform pattern of three-member wards across England, or a uniform pattern of two-member wards with biennial elections. Whole council

elections would require no change to local authorities' current electoral arrangements.

**4.13** The Boundary Committee for England has noted that the requirement to recommend a number of councillors per ward divisible by three in metropolitan borough areas (in practice meaning three-member wards), has caused specific difficulties when attempting to reflect community identities in authorities such as Liverpool and Wakefield. As one respondent to our consultation also observed, 'enforced three-member wards necessarily involve uncomfortable marriages between unconnected areas and equally unsatisfactory division of communities'.

**4.14** The Boundary Committee notes that the flexibility to recommend single-, two- or three-member wards enables it to more easily reflect local communities while continuing to provide good levels of electoral equality.<sup>6</sup> Under a pattern of whole council elections, authorities would not be restricted to any particular ward size, since the entire electorate would be eligible to vote together once every four years.

### Awareness and understanding of elections

**4.15** As we have noted in the previous chapter, it is fundamentally important to ensure that electors understand when and why local elections are held. Electors with little understanding of the local electoral process will be less likely to participate in the democratic process, and less able to participate effectively. A clear and straight-forward pattern of local elections that electors understand will also contribute to increased transparency of the democratic process and local accountability.

**4.16** We have discussed in detail in chapter 3 the findings of public awareness research conducted by MORI in the weeks leading up to the May 2003 local elections in England. The evidence available to us indicates that electors are generally ill-informed and unaware of the current pattern of local elections, and we

have recommended that the local electoral cycle should follow a clearer and more consistent pattern across England. It is also clear that there is a need for greater consistency within local authorities. Although nearly one in three respondents overall said they didn't know how frequently local elections were held in their area, respondents in wards where elections were held either annually or only once every four years were most likely to answer correctly (34% and 30% respectively). Only 5% of respondents in areas with elections in three years out of four and 19% of those in areas with elections in two out of four years were able to correctly identify how often they were able to vote.

**4.17** The evidence available to us from the research carried out by MORI suggests that it is particularly important to ensure consistency not only nationally across England, but also internally within individual authorities. A deeper understanding of the local democratic process would be greatly aided by a more equitable pattern of local elections, as discussed above. Electors would be certain either that they will be able to vote every year or once every four years, and that their neighbours will do likewise.

### Participation and turnout

**4.18** Good levels of turnout, as well as participation more generally in the democratic process, are essential to the continued relevance and legitimacy of local government. Continued low turnout may undermine the authority of local government to speak and act on behalf of the communities it represents.

**4.19** Annual or biennial elections hold the potential for more frequent opportunities for participation by electors. However, there is also concern that more frequent elections may tend to dilute public interest in elections, and that in practice electors may tire of passing judgment on their representatives annually. As we have noted above, it can be difficult – and in certain circumstances impossible – for electors to change overall political control of an authority when fewer than half the seats are up for election, and it is clear that this can act as a major disincentive to vote.

<sup>6</sup> The Boundary Committee for England is the body charged with reviewing the internal warding arrangements of local authorities in England. It is required by statute to ensure electoral equality between wards within individual local authority areas, and to reflect local community identities and interests.

**4.20** Certainly poor awareness and understanding of the local electoral cycle can affect turnout and participation. Electors who do not understand when local elections are held will be less able to participate in the democratic process and less likely to vote. As we noted earlier in chapter 3, one-sixth of the respondents to the public attitudes survey carried out by MORI were potentially disenfranchised – whether they wanted to vote or not – simply by being ill-informed or unaware of the elections taking place.

**4.21** In our consultation paper we outlined the findings from a study of the relationship between the local electoral cycle and local election turnout, carried out by the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth. Taking into account social, economic and political characteristics, the research sought to identify the particular contribution to overall local turnout made by the electoral cycle, and consider what effect changing electoral cycles might have on turnout in those authorities that currently have whole council elections or elections by thirds.

**4.22** The Elections Centre's evidence gives some weight to the suggestion that more frequent elections can tend to dilute public interest and reduce turnout. Over the last 30 years, they found that the four-yearly elected London boroughs generally have had a higher electoral turnout than the metropolitan boroughs, which elect by thirds. In all years when both types of authority have held elections, with the single exception of 2002, the turnout in London has been between two and ten percentage points higher than in the metropolitan authorities. Similar differences were measured between shire districts that hold either partial or whole council elections. In those years when both types of district hold elections, turnout has been lower in shire districts with elections by thirds.

**4.23** Analysing social, economic, structural and political variables, the Elections Centre sought to understand the key determinants of local participation and turnout, and also assessed the theoretical effect of applying the alternative electoral cycle to the authorities included in the study. Its findings suggested that turnout would decline in authorities that normally have whole council elections if

they held elections by thirds, and would rise slightly if authorities that normally have elections by thirds held whole council elections instead.

**4.24** Many respondents, particularly those from within local government itself, suggested that the true cause of low levels of turnout and engagement lay in the decreasing powers and relevance of local government, and poor perceptions among electors of local government's ability to effect change. In their view, changes to the electoral cycle were unlikely to help improve turnout or democratic participation. Several respondents from local authority areas that currently elect by thirds also suggested that turnout figures in their own areas did not concur with the overall findings of the Elections Centre. We recognise that many different factors may influence levels of turnout, but do not accept that individual exceptions to the Elections Centre's findings invalidate its conclusions. The balance of evidence suggests that local government electors are less likely to participate in the democratic process in areas that hold elections by thirds.

### Management and performance

**4.25** In addition to democratic considerations discussed above, the cycle or frequency of elections may also have some impact on the capacity of local authorities to manage effectively and deliver their responsibilities. It is clear from our consultation that local government stakeholders particularly value the role of stability and leadership in enabling effective management of local authorities.

**4.26** However, respondents viewed the idea of stability in different ways. For those supporting elections by thirds, stability meant less potential for abrupt changes of political control and switches of policy. Those who favour whole council elections every four years, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of consistency of policies and representatives through a defined period of office, without the interruption and diversion of intervening elections.

**4.27** In our consultation and evidence paper, we also examined the results of the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspections of county councils, London boroughs, metropolitan

boroughs and unitary councils. It was not clear to us that there was any direct link between the electoral cycle of individual authorities and their CPA inspection rating. Although some inspection reports noted issues such as relatively high levels of turnover of councillors, it is clear that other unrelated factors have far greater bearing on the performance of local authorities, in particular the need for strong political and officer leadership.

**4.28** It is clear that strong and otherwise well-managed authorities can perform well and deliver services effectively under either type of electoral cycle, and equally that either system can be problematic when things go wrong. However, such evidence as there is suggests that whole council elections every four years can provide a degree of inherent stability. Whole council elections give a clear mandate to representatives for a programme of policies during the following four years, and allow time for an administration to carry through its policies. At the end of the four-year period the administration is held to account by the electorate and can be judged by its record, its success or failure. We note that many authorities that elect by thirds, particularly metropolitan boroughs, have traditionally had strong single-party political control, a legacy of political stability rather than any inherent structural stability.

### Other issues

**4.29** We have also been asked to consider the extent to which any option for change to the electoral cycle might be facilitated by possible new ways of voting, including increased postal voting, electronic counting and multi-channel e-voting. We recognise that an option involving a significantly increased number of elections may present some administrative challenges, and that new ways of voting may be helpful for both electors and administrators. However, we do not view this as a significant factor to be taken into account in considering the most appropriate electoral cycle for local authorities in England. We also note that the frequency of opportunities to pilot new voting technologies in England may be affected by the recommendations of this review. Again, while this may be an important factor within the context of the overall electoral pilots programme, we have not considered it significant in this review.

### Recommendation

**4.30** We have carefully considered the range of arguments advanced by respondents in favour of either whole council or partial elections for local authorities in England. While we have sympathy with many of these arguments, the balance of evidence that we have considered suggests that whole council elections are more likely to provide clarity for electors and a degree of stability for local authorities. In particular, certain key principles have emerged that have guided our conclusions.

**4.31** We have recommended that the cycle of local government elections in England should follow a clear and consistent pattern, within and across local authorities. In our view, a key principle in considering the electoral cycle for local authorities should be to ensure that all electors are given the same opportunities for participation in the local democratic process. Having taken into account the evidence and arguments presented during our consultation process, we have concluded that a pattern of whole council elections for all local authorities in England would provide a clear, equitable and easy to understand electoral process that would best serve the interests of local government electors.

**4.32** In particular, a pattern of whole council elections would allow community identities to be more easily reflected in ward boundaries when reviewing local authorities' electoral arrangements. We also note that, under a consistent pattern of whole council elections across England, there would be no obvious reason why metropolitan boroughs should continue to be required to have three-member wards. The opportunity of this review might be taken to remove the current requirement that metropolitan borough wards must have a number of members divisible by three, although we recognise that this would require change to primary legislation.

**4.33** The Commission recommends that each local authority in England should hold whole council elections, with all councillors elected simultaneously, once every four years.

**4.34** Our suggestions for the implementation of the recommendations of this review are outlined in the following chapter.





# 5 Implementation

We recognise that our recommendations to simplify the current cycle of local government elections in England would, if implemented, involve considerable change to existing arrangements. Our proposals therefore seek to balance the need for a pragmatic approach to change with our desire to see timely reform.

## Implementation issues

**5.1** Under our recommendations for change to the current local electoral cycle in England, outlined in the previous two chapters, each local authority would elect all of its members simultaneously, once every four years. Voters in London would continue to elect their mayor and members of the London Assembly every four years.

**5.2** However, several significant issues for the implementation of our recommendations remain, which we have not fully addressed in the preceding chapters. While we are content to recommend that individual local authorities should hold whole council elections once every four years, we are conscious that a national pattern of electoral cycles will be created by bringing these individual electoral cycles together. We have considered a number of issues relating to the national pattern of local electoral cycles below, and propose some options for implementation for further consideration by the Government and others.

## Councillors' terms of office

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**5.3** As we noted in our consultation paper, four-year terms of office have been the norm in local government in England since the reorganisation of local government in the early 1970s. However, we recognised that certain possible options for change to the local electoral cycle might require some change to the normal term of office for councillors. A three-year term, for example, would allow annual elections by thirds with no fallow year. During consultation, we asked respondents whether the four-year term of office for local councillors should be retained.

**5.4** The balance of views on the most appropriate term of office for councillors was strongly in support of retaining the current four-year term, with a significant majority opposing change. Respondents were in broad agreement that four years allow sufficient time for councillors to grow into their role and plan for the medium term, without sacrificing the advantages of regular electoral accountability. One respondent proposed a five-year term of office to allow coordination

with European parliamentary elections, while several others suggested that a three-year term for councillors would mean greater accountability.

**5.5** We have seen no significant evidence to suggest that the current four-year term is inappropriate, and there is certainly little support for change among respondents. However, it is likely that some changes to initial terms of office for councillors will be necessary during the transition between current arrangements and any future pattern. Issues relating to this transitional period are discussed in more detail below.

### Timing of elections

**5.6** Under current arrangements for elections in areas with two tiers of local government, elections to the different authorities are not held at the same time, although parish council elections are normally held in the same year as those of the principal authority. County council elections are held in the fallow fourth year of the electoral cycle for district authorities that elect by thirds, which is also the mid-point for districts that hold whole council elections. In considering the implementation of proposals for change to the local electoral cycle, we asked respondents whether it was appropriate to continue to stagger elections to different tiers of local government.

**5.7** There was broad support in response to our consultation paper for continuing to stagger elections in areas with two tiers of local government, with less than a quarter of respondents preferring to hold elections in the same year. Respondents particularly emphasised the importance of highlighting the distinction between the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of local government, in order to reduce confusion and ensure clear lines of accountability. One respondent noted that ‘it is not unusual for a member of a district authority to unfairly take the blame for poor service delivery from a county authority (and vice versa)’.

**5.8** Those who preferred not to stagger local elections suggested that combining elections in a single ‘local election day’ would clearly highlight the opportunity for

participation in the democratic process. They also suggested that combining elections could reduce costs, both for political parties and electoral administrators in relation to the running of elections. However, several respondents argued that combined local government elections would be more susceptible to being used as an informal referendum on national government.

**5.9** We recognise that respondents would largely prefer that elections continue to be staggered in two-tier areas. We have outlined two alternative patterns. Under the first of these, different types of authorities would hold elections in the same year, while, under the second, elections for district councils and county councils or city-wide authorities would be staggered. It does, however, seem sensible to us that parish councils should continue to be elected at the same time as the district or unitary council. Elected mayors, where they have been put in place under the Local Government Act 2000, should also be elected at the same time as the principal authority.

**5.10** A majority of respondents also preferred not to combine local elections with elections to the Westminster or European parliaments. While they acknowledged that local turnout may increase, they also expressed concern that local government issues were likely to be overshadowed by national concerns. Indeed, turnout at local elections in England does tend to increase when held at the same time as Westminster parliamentary general elections, and can also rise when held at the same time as European parliament elections. However, analysis of national and local media in Scotland in May 2003 suggested that the local elections were overshadowed by the Scottish Parliament contest, receiving little coverage or commentary.<sup>8</sup> We have some sympathy with this concern, and would ordinarily prefer Westminster or European parliament elections to take place in a different year to local government elections in England. However, we recognise that this is an unrealistic expectation at present, given the absence of a fixed term for the Westminster Parliament and the five-year term of the European Parliament.

<sup>8</sup> Institute of Governance, University of Edinburgh (2003) *Media Coverage of the Council Elections in Scotland, 2003*.

## Options for implementation

**5.11** We outline below two proposals for the implementation of our recommendations for change to the cycle of local government elections in England. Other options for implementation were considered but dismissed. We have included provisional suggestions for the cycle of elections to any future regional assemblies, in line with our recommendation that any future bodies should remain consistent with the pattern of local government electoral cycles. However, we recognise that the introduction of any regional assemblies is dependent on the result of future referendums in those areas. We have also included details of Westminster and European parliamentary election cycles in the summary tables. While European parliamentary elections take place every five years, Westminster parliamentary elections are not held on a fixed term, and we have assumed a full five-year term for Westminster in the models described below.

**5.12** We have not included specific dates for the implementation of the models discussed below. We have indicated the points during the four-year electoral cycle at which elections might take place, but the actual implementation of any model should be the subject of further discussion and debate.

### Option one

**5.13** Under the first of our suggested options for implementation, every local authority in England, including county councils, district councils, metropolitan borough councils, London borough councils, unitary councils and parish councils, would elect all of their members simultaneously once every four years. The Greater London Authority would also be elected at the same time, together with any future elected regional assemblies.

Table 2: option one

Year	Local authority elections	Other elections
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes Counties, GLA	EP (regional assemblies)
2	<i>No elections</i>	
3	Westminster?	
4	<i>No elections</i>	
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes Counties, GLA	(regional assemblies)
2	EP	
3	<i>No elections</i>	
4	Westminster?	
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes Counties, GLA	(regional assemblies)

**5.14** This option would have the advantage of providing a clear nationwide focus on local government elections in England. However, combining all local government elections might diminish the important distinction for electors between different local government elections taking place in the same area. It may also present significant difficulties in making clear distinctions between the roles and responsibilities of local and sub-national government in areas where regional assemblies or other strategic authorities may be established in future. Combination might also make it more likely that local government elections in England be considered as mid-term judgment on national issues when held between Westminster elections, or are entirely influenced and overshadowed by any general election held at the same time.

**5.15** From an administrative perspective, some election officials have indicated concerns about the practical difficulties of running multiple local elections simultaneously, although they acknowledge that

combined elections may result in some cost savings. It is also not clear at present how and when the Government intends to take forward our recommendation that all local government elections should be conducted by all-postal ballot.<sup>9</sup> Using different voting methods for different elections taking place simultaneously in particular areas, shire districts and county councils or London boroughs and the GLA, for example, would raise issues for both administrators and voters.

## Option two

**5.16** The second option for the implementation of our recommendations would see all local government electors in England electing members of their most immediate local council – district councils, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs or unitary authorities – simultaneously once every four years. Two years later, in the mid-point of the electoral cycle, those electors in areas with county councils or strategic city-wide authorities (or future sub-national authorities including any regional assemblies) would elect representatives to these bodies.

**Table 3: option two**

Year	Local authority elections	Other elections
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes	EP
2	<i>No elections</i>	
3	Counties, GLA	Westminster? (regional assemblies)
4	<i>No elections</i>	
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes	EP
2	<i>No elections</i>	
3	Counties, GLA	(regional assemblies)
4	Westminster?	
1	Districts, metropolitan boroughs, London boroughs, unitary authorities, parishes	

**5.17** Under this second option for implementation, all local government electors would have the opportunity to vote in the first year of the electoral cycle, with the benefit of simplicity and a national focus on local issues. It would also make clear the important distinction for electors between different tiers of local and strategic city-wide or sub-national government in those areas where such arrangements exist.

## Recommendation

**5.18** Our preferred option for the implementation of our recommendations is the second of the two described above, which would see all local government electors in England voting at the same time once every four years for their most immediate local authority, whether that be district council, metropolitan or London borough or unitary council. Unitary county councils, such as the Isle of Wight, would also hold elections in the first year of the cycle, alongside other unitary councils. All those electors in areas with further local or city-wide strategic authorities

<sup>9</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003), *The shape of elections to come*.

(county councils or the Greater London Authority) would vote for those authorities two years later, in the mid-point of the four-year electoral cycle. We would envisage that elections to any future levels of sub-national government, including regional assemblies, would also take place in the third year of the cycle.

**5.19** While we recognise that the first option for implementation may have some merits, we consider that the second option would provide the best balance between administrative convenience and the need for clarity from the voter's perspective. In particular, we are concerned that option one would not provide sufficient clarity for electors regarding the timing and purpose of local government elections, and would be likely to diminish the important distinction between different authorities in areas with two tiers of local government. Greater clarity and consistency of the local election cycle should also give national political parties and media the opportunity to focus on local, rather than national, political issues at election time.

The Commission recommends that all local government electors in England should elect members of their district, metropolitan borough, London borough or unitary council simultaneously once every four years. Two years later, in the mid-point of the electoral cycle, electors in areas with county councils, city-wide authorities or any future sub-national government should elect representatives to those bodies.

### Transitional arrangements

**5.20** We have outlined in this and preceding chapters our recommendations for change to simplify the cycle of local government elections in England. Our findings highlight the need to establish a number of important principles for local electors, particularly the need for consistency and equity in opportunities to vote at local elections. We look forward to the response to this review, and hope that our conclusions will be welcomed. In the event that our recommendations are accepted by Government and Parliament, we would expect reasonably swift movement to ensure timely implementation.

**5.21** The move to a consistent pattern of whole council elections across England would have implications for a number of aspects of current electoral arrangements. In particular, there may be changes to the initial terms of office of some councillors during the transitional period before the full implementation of any recommendations. In those areas that currently elect by thirds or by halves, for example, the terms of office of some councillors may be reduced in the years before the first full council elections. Similarly, although all county councils and the Greater London Authority currently hold whole council elections, their elections take place in different years. Changes to the terms of office for some sitting councillors would be required in order to ensure that in future years those elections take place at the same time.

**5.22** We note that both five-year terms of office and consecutive election years are generally considered undesirable, and while variations to terms have been used in the past as part of transitional arrangements, there is no precedent for election to a five-year term of office. Arrangements for the implementation of these recommendations should involve as little disruption to current electoral arrangements as possible, without unnecessary delay.

If the recommendations of this review are accepted by Government and Parliament, we will work with central and local government partners to identify the most appropriate approach to timely implementation.

# Appendix 1

## Secretary of State's request to The Electoral Commission

### Request pursuant to Section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and Terms of Reference

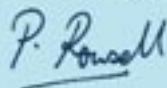
1. Section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPER Act) states:

*"At the request of the Secretary of State, and within such time as the Secretary of State may specify, the Commission shall-*

*(a) review, and  
(b) submit a report to the Secretary of State on,  
such matters or matters (whether or not falling within subsection (1)) as the Secretary of State may specify."*

2. Pursuant to the provisions of section 6(2) of the PPER Act, the Secretary of State hereby requests that the Electoral Commission review and submit a report to him on the cycle of local government elections in England<sup>1</sup>, identifying options for change that would simplify the current cycle. Such options may include, if appropriate, options involving changes to councillor's terms of office and to local authorities' electoral arrangements<sup>2</sup> in England.
3. The Electoral Commission is requested to include in its report an assessment of the desirability and practicality of any options for change it identifies and recommendations as to the implementation of such options.
4. In carrying out the review and making its report, the Commission is requested to have regard to the matters specified in the Annex and of all other matters that they consider relevant.
5. The report shall be prepared by the Commission and presented to the Secretary of State no later than 31 January 2004.

Signed for and on behalf of the Secretary of State



28 January 2003

<sup>1</sup> "local government elections" shall be the elections (other than those caused by vacancies) for principal authorities (including mayoral elections), parish councils and the Greater London Authority.

<sup>2</sup> the number and boundaries of wards and electoral divisions and the number of councillors (see s14 of the Local Government Act 1992).

## Annex

The matters to which the Commission are requested to have regard are:

1. The extent to which an option for change:
  - would improve councils' democratic legitimacy and local accountability;
  - would enable the electorate and public generally to easily understand when elections are to be held and their purpose;
  - would be likely to improve participation of the local electorate in the electoral process, including participation of specific groups – such as young people and ethnic minorities – where participation in the process is particularly low; and
  - would be likely to facilitate the effective management of local authorities and particularly performance improvements in the case of local authorities categorised as “poor performers” in the Comprehensive Performance Assessments.
  - Might be facilitated by possible new ways of polling, including increased postal voting, electronic counting and multi channel e-voting.
2. The relationship between local government elections and other elections in England, namely the elections to the Westminster and European Parliaments, including cases where elections currently fall in close proximity to each other, and the combination of polls at local government elections with such elections, or otherwise.
3. The relationship between different local government elections in related areas, and the combination (or otherwise) of polls at such elections.

# Appendix 2

## Respondents to the consultation paper and consultation meetings

Total respondents 269

### Local authorities

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Adur District Council  
 Arun District Council  
 Ashfield District Council  
 Babergh District Council  
 Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council  
 Bedfordshire County Council  
 Bexley Council  
 Birmingham City Council  
 Blyth Valley Borough Council  
 Bracknell Forest Borough Council  
 Breckland District Council  
 Brentwood Borough Council  
 Bristol City Council  
 Broadland District Council  
 Burnley Borough Council  
 Cambridge City Council  
 Cannock Chase Council  
 Canterbury City Council  
 Carlisle City Council  
 Chelmsford Borough Council  
 Cheshire County Council  
 Chester City Council  
 Copeland Borough Council  
 Coventry City Council  
 Darlington Borough Council  
 Daventry District Council  
 Derby City Council  
 Derbyshire Dales District Council  
 Derwentside District Council  
 Devon County Council  
 Dorset County Council  
 Durham County Council  
 East Dorset District Council  
 East Hampshire District Council  
 East Hertfordshire District Council  
 Eastbourne Borough Council  
 Eastleigh Borough Council  
 Epping Forest District Council  
 Exeter City Council  
 Fareham Borough Council  
 Gateshead Council

Gedling Borough Council  
 Gloucester City Council  
 Gloucestershire County Council  
 Halton Borough Council  
 Hampshire County Council  
 Harrogate Borough Council  
 Hart District Council  
 Hastings Borough Council  
 Havant Borough Council  
 Kent County Council  
 Kerrier District Council  
 Kettering Borough Council  
 King's Lynn & West Norfolk  
 Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Lancashire County Council  
 Lancaster City Council  
 Leicestershire County Council  
 Lewes District Council  
 London Borough of Barnet  
 London Borough of Camden  
 London Borough of Enfield  
 London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham  
 London Borough of Harrow  
 London Borough of Havering  
 Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea  
 Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames  
 London Borough of Lambeth  
 London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
 London Borough of Wandsworth  
 Luton Borough Council  
 Maidstone Borough Council  
 Maldon District Council  
 Manchester City Council  
 Medway Council  
 Mid Beds District Council  
 Mid Suffolk District Council  
 Mid Sussex District Council  
 Mole Valley District Council  
 New Forest District Council  
 Norfolk County Council  
 North Cornwall District Council  
 North Dorset District Council  
 North East Derbyshire District Council  
 North Lincolnshire Council



North Shropshire District Council  
 Northampton Borough Council  
 Northumberland District Council  
 Norwich City Council  
 Nuneaton & Bedworth  
 Borough of Oadby & Wigston  
 Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Oxfordshire County Council  
 Pendle Borough Council  
 Peterborough City Council  
 Borough of Poole  
 Preston City Council  
 Purbeck District Council  
 Ribble Valley Borough Council  
 Reigate and Banstead Borough Council  
 Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Rochford District Council  
 Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Rugby Borough Council  
 Rushcliffe Borough Council  
 Rushmoor Borough Council  
 Salford City Council  
 Shepway District Council  
 Slough Borough Council  
 South Bedfordshire District Council  
 South Bucks District Council  
 South Gloucestershire Council  
 South Ribble Borough Council  
 South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Southampton City Council  
 Southend-on-sea Borough Council  
 St. Edmundsbury District Council  
 Stafford Borough Council  
 Staffordshire County Council  
 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Stratford on Avon District Council  
 Stroud District Council  
 Swale Borough Council  
 Swindon Borough Council  
 Tandridge District Council  
 Tauton Deane Electoral Services  
 Borough of Telford and Wrekin  
 Three Rivers District Council  
 Torbay Council

Uttlesford District Council  
 Warwick District Council  
 Waveney District Council executive  
 Waveney District Council cross-party working group  
 West Oxfordshire District Council  
 West Sussex County Council  
 Weymouth & Portland Borough Council  
 Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Wolverhampton City Council  
 City of Worcester  
 Worcester County Council  
 Wycombe District Council  
 Wyre Forest District Council

#### Local authority representatives

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Cllr Ray Auger, South Kesteven District Council  
 Cllr David Beechey, Bridgnorth District Council  
 Cllr Nick Brown, Portishead Town Council  
 Mayor Frank Branston, Bedford Borough Council  
 Cllr John Byrne, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Cllr Judith Cluff, Taunton Deane Borough Council  
 Cllr Carol Davis, Herne and Broomfield Parish Council  
 Cllr David Gardner, London Borough of Greenwich  
 Cllr John T Hall, Test Valley District Council  
 Cllr Colin Inglis, Kingston-upon-Hull Council  
 Cllr Geoff Knight, Lancaster City Council  
 Cllr David Nettleton, St. Edmundsbury Borough Council  
 Cllr Don Phillips, Chiltern District Council  
 Cllr Mary Smith, Gloucester City Council  
 Cllr G W Taylor, South Kesteven District Council  
 Cllr John Waters, London Borough of Bexley  
 Cllr Gavin Webb, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council  
 Cllr David White, Stockport Metropolitan Council  
 Cllr Janet Whitehouse, Essex County Council  
 Cllr John Wilks, South Kesteven District Council

#### Local government officers

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Sue Bonham-Lovett, Electoral Services Manager,  
 Weymouth & Portland Borough Council  
 Max Caller, Chief Executive, London Borough of Hackney  
 Liz Cloke, Senior Electoral Services Officer, Basingstoke

and Deane Borough Council  
 Geoff Knowles, Electoral Registration Manager, Newport City Council  
 David Holling, Returning Officer, West Berkshire Council  
 John Walker, Chief Elections and Electoral Registration Officer, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council  
 Darren Whitney, Principal Democratic Officer, Stratford on Avon District Council

#### Local councils

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Badsey & Aldington Parish Council  
 Combe Hay Parish Council  
 Faversham Town Council  
 Godalming Town Council  
 Hatfield Town Council  
 Holbrok Parish Council  
 Keynsham Town Council  
 Kingston Seymour Parish Council  
 Long Ashton Parish Council  
 Loughton Town Council  
 Southam Town Council  
 Stroud Town Council  
 Totnes Town Council  
 Ubley Parish Council  
 Ufton Parish Council  
 Upton-upon-Severn Town Council

#### Members of Parliament and Peers<sup>1</sup>

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Claire Curtis-Thomas MP (Crosby and Formby)  
 Valerie Davey MP (Bristol West)  
 David Drew MP (Stroud)  
 Lynne Jones MP (Birmingham Selly Oak)  
 Khalid Mahmood MP (Birmingham Perry Barr)  
 Andrew Turner MP (Isle of Wight)  
 Derek Wyatt MP (Sittingbourne and Sheppey)  
 The Lord Best OBE  
 The Rt Hon the Lord Renton  
 Lord Wolfson of Marylebone

#### Political parties

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Citizens Party of Halton  
 The Conservative Party  
 The Green Party of England and Wales  
 Molesey Residents Association  
 The Populist Party  
 Rainham Residents Association  
 Runnymede Independent Resident Group  
 Scottish Liberal Democrats  
 Upminster & Cranham Residents' Association

#### Local political groups

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Amber Valley Borough Council Labour Group  
 Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council Conservative Group  
 Basingstoke and Deane Labour Group  
 Basingstoke and Deane Liberal Democrat Group  
 Birmingham Liberal Democrat Group  
 Blackburn Labour Party  
 Bristol Conservatives  
 Bristol City Council Liberal Democrats  
 Parks Branch of Chester Constituency Labour Party  
 Ealing Liberal Democrats  
 Eccles Constituency Labour Party  
 Exeter Conservative Association  
 Gillingham & Medway Liberal Democrats  
 Herefordshire County Council Conservative Group  
 Lancaster City Council – Conservative Group  
 Lancaster City Council – Liberal Democrat Group  
 Lancaster and Lancashire Councils Green Party Group  
 Lichfield, Burntwood and Tamworth Local Lib Dems  
 London Borough of Ealing Conservative Group  
 Merton Liberal Democrats  
 Mole Valley District Council Independent Group  
 North Lincolnshire Labour Group  
 Penwith District Council Conservative Group  
 Penwith District Council Independent Group  
 Penwith District Council Labour Group  
 Penwith District Council Liberal Democrat Group  
 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Labour Group  
 Suffolk County Council Conservative Group  
 Swale Labour Party  
 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Conservative Group

<sup>1</sup> Including one MP who did not identify him- or herself.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Liberal Democrat Group  
 Labour in Wandsworth  
 West Lewisham Green Party  
 Wimbledon Constituency Labour Party

### Academics

Professor Chris Skelcher, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham  
 Professor John Stewart, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham

### Other organisations

Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)  
 Association of Electoral Administrators Scottish Branch  
 Association of London Government  
 The Audit Commission  
 Boundary Commission for England (confidentiality requested)  
 Essex Association of Local Councils  
 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland  
 Kent Association of Parish Councils  
 Local Government Information Unit  
 Local Government Association  
 National Association of Local Councils  
 National Union of Residents' Associations  
 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights  
 Royal Mail Group PLC  
 Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE)  
 Welsh Assembly Government

### Individuals

Albert Broadbent  
 D. J. Close  
 Mary Crane  
 Roger Crudge  
 Peter Dunham  
 Angela Essex  
 John Hoare  
 John Kelly  
 Joe Otten

Nicky Rylance  
 E. R. Schrin

### Consultation meetings

Date	Meeting
10 July 2003	LGA North West regional group (Blackburn)
18 July 2003	LGA West Sussex sub-regional group (Chichester)
9 September 2003	Association of London Government
9 September 2003	Crawley Borough Council
11 September 2003	AEA South East branch (Crowborough)
11 September 2003	LGA Labour group (Local Government House, London)
11 September 2003	LGA Liberal Democrat group (Local Government House, London)
12 September 2003	AEA South branch (Andover)
12 September 2003	AEA London branch (City Hall)
12 September 2003	County Councils Network (Local Government House, London)
15 September 2003	AEA North East branch (Chester-le-Street)
19 September 2003	AEA West Midlands branch (Shrewsbury)
23 September 2003	AEA Eastern branch (Saffron Walden)
26 September 2003	LGA Southern Counties regional group (Isle of Wight)
2 October 2003	Discussion group on CPA, six authorities (Trevelyan House, London)
3 October 2003	LGA South West regional group (Taunton)
14 October 2003	LGA Conservative group (Local Government House, London)

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# Notes







# The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

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