

The cycle of local government elections in England

This consultation paper invites comments to inform our review of the local government electoral cycle in England, and our recommendations for change to simplify the current cycle.

Please send your responses to:
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by Friday 3 October
2003.

Background

In its white paper *Strong local leadership – quality public services*, published in December 2001, the Government noted that:

The current cycle of local government elections is confusing ... 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.

In January 2003, the Government invited The Electoral Commission to review the cycle of local elections in England and identify options for change that would simplify the current cycle. This review considers elections to principal local authorities (including mayoral elections), the Greater London Authority and parish councils. In recommending any options for change, the Commission may consider changes to councillors' terms of office, the number of councillors for local authority areas and the number and boundaries of local authority wards and divisions.

Review process

This consultation paper seeks views and evidence on a number of key questions, and the consultation period will extend until early October 2003. We will consider all responses submitted to us, before formulating options for change to the current cycle of local government elections. We will submit our final report, including our recommendations, to the Deputy Prime Minister by 29 January 2004. Our report will be published and made available on our website.

The current local government electoral cycle

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

- metropolitan borough authorities elect one third of their members each year;
- London boroughs elect all their members at once every four years;
- shire districts may hold either whole council elections, elections by thirds or by halves; and
- county councils elect all their members once every four years.

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

Q1 Should there be a more uniform pattern of local government electoral cycles in England? If so, why?

Q2 To what extent should local preferences be taken into account when considering future arrangements for local government electoral cycles?

Q3 Should the current four-year term of office for local councillors be retained? If not, why?

In areas with two tiers of local government, county council areas for

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example, elections to the different tiers are currently staggered. Local government elections in England may also be held at the same time as general elections, and the Government has recently proposed that the 2004 local elections should be combined with European parliamentary elections.

Q4 In areas with more than one tier of local government, should elections to different levels continue to be staggered, or held at the same time? Why?

Q5 In developing options for change to the current local government electoral cycle, should the Commission consider the possible future combination of local government elections in England with other national or European elections? If so, why?

Evidence

Public perceptions

The results of an opinion survey carried out for the Commission by MORI in April 2003 indicate that there is widespread public confusion and lack of knowledge about when local elections in England are held. While three-quarters of respondents were able to correctly identify whether there were elections in their area on 1 May 2003, fewer than one in five were unable to actually name which council they were for. More than half of respondents incorrectly identified how often local elections were held in their area, while 32% did not know. There was broad support for moves to harmonise electoral cycles across England, although still some support for retaining some variations according to local circumstances.

Participation

The Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, undertook a statistical analysis of the relationship between the local electoral cycle and turnout at local government

elections in England, which indicates that differences in turnout do exist between local authorities using alternative electoral cycles. The research suggests that, in theory, turnout in local authorities with whole council elections could decline if they were to switch cycle, and could increase if areas with elections by thirds were to switch. The frequency with which electors are invited to vote also appears to affect the level of participation, with marginally greater turnout in areas where electors are given less frequent opportunities to vote.

Performance

We have been asked to consider the extent to which the local electoral cycle may facilitate the effective management of local authorities, and note that there does not appear to be a clear relationship between Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) ratings and local authority electoral cycles. A small number of CPA reports considered the impact of issues relating to the turnover of council members, changes in political composition and the effects of short-term or changeable decision-making.

Q6 Do you have any comments or further evidence on the evidence which we have gathered? In particular, we would value any practical experience or local examples of the issues discussed.

Arguments

The range of arguments for and against either partial or whole council elections is extensive, and this debate has been rehearsed and refined on numerous occasions during recent years. In summary, we have identified a number of arguments for either cycle:

For partial elections

- More frequent opportunities for electors to exercise their right to vote;

- may facilitate more immediate political accountability;
- may tend to produce less drastic changes in political direction, and provide greater political continuity;
- can ensure that the political composition of authorities more accurately reflects the current political complexion of local areas;
- may reduce the likelihood that the timing of important or controversial decisions are distorted by the timing of elections.

For whole council elections

- Greater possibility of wholesale change in control may encourage participation;
- too-frequent elections might dilute public interest;
- opportunity for all electors in an area to influence the composition of the authority at the same time;
- may tend to encourage greater long-term planning by authorities, and discourage continuous election campaigning.

Q7 In addition to the arguments outlined above, are there any other relevant issues which we should take into account?

Q8 In considering the simplification of the local government electoral cycle, which issues or arguments are the most important? Why?

Further information

The full paper is available on The Electoral Commission's website www.electoralcommission.org.uk or in hard copy from the Commission's offices.

We are an independent body 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. For more information see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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How old is old enough?

The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections

The Commission believes that the time is right to review the current minimum age at which people can take part in elections. The Commission has therefore published a consultation paper and seeks views on the issues outlined here by **Friday 31 October 2003**.

Current legal position

To vote in all elections in the UK an individual must be at least 18 years old. This requirement is now contained in the Representation of the People Act 1983, although it was first enacted in 1969.

To stand as a candidate, an individual must be at least 21 years old. This is found in different legal provisions, dependent on the body or office for which the election is being held.

In the UK, there is no standard legal 'age of majority', with different minimum ages applying in relation to different activities. For example:

- 10 (8 in Scotland): criminal responsibility;
- 13: part-time employment;
- 16: leave education, enter full-time employment, have sex, smoke, play the National Lottery, join a trade union, apply for a passport, pay tax and National Insurance, and (with parental consent) join the armed forces, get married, or leave home;
- 17: drive a car or light motorbike;
- 18: buy alcohol without a meal, gamble in a betting shop or casino, be tried in an adult court, serve on a jury, and do without parental consent those things exercisable at 16 only with;
- 21: drive larger and more powerful motor vehicles.

International context

Most Western democracies have a minimum voting age of 18, although there are some variations within countries, e.g. a higher voting age for senior levels of government and a lower voting age for local elections. The international picture is more mixed in relation to candidacy. Many countries have the same minimum age for candidacy and voting (i.e. often 18), but again with some variations by seniority of the elected office.

Young people and democratic engagement

The Commission is particularly concerned about declining participation rates in UK elections, especially among young people. Estimated turnout at the 2001 general election among 18-24 year-olds fell to just 39%.

Young people often take an interest in specific issues, but can be alienated from political structures, including elections, for a number of reasons. These reasons include a perceived failure of politicians to listen to and act upon young peoples' concerns.

Recent developments that might strengthen the link between young people and the democratic process include the introduction of Citizenship Education in secondary schools and the increasing use of elected school councils. Some suggest that allowing voting at 16 would be the logical conclusion of citizenship education in schools. However, different approaches are being taken in

The Electoral Commission: How old is old enough?

England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the curriculum changes are still new.

Some people believe that lowering the minimum ages would be a clear statement that politicians trust young people and take their views seriously. Others say a better approach is to involve young people more directly, for instance through local authority forums.

- Do you think that lowering the voting age, or allowing younger candidates to stand for election, might encourage young people to take part in elections?
- Do you think that lowering the voting age, or the age for standing as a candidate, would increase the levels of trust between young people and politicians?
- If you are a young person, teacher or parent – in your experience, is citizenship education changing young peoples' knowledge of and interest in elections and democracy?

Time for change?

Neither the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party have an official party policy on the minimum voting and candidacy ages. Many other parties do: the Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Greens, and the Scottish Socialists all back lowering the voting and candidacy age. Both the Local Government Association and the Mayor of London also support a lower voting age of 16.

Three independent commissions have recently recommended lowering the voting age and/or the candidacy age for local elections: the Kerley Working Group in Scotland; the Commission on Local Governance in England; and the Sunderland Commission in Wales. In Northern Ireland, the Human Rights

Commission has also suggested a voting age of 17.

The main argument supporting the status quo has been that most voters under 18 and candidates under 21 would not be sufficiently mature to use those rights properly, because they would: have insufficient understanding of the issues; be more likely to act irresponsibly; and be more easily influenced by others. When lowering the voting age to 16 was voted on in the House of Commons in December 1999, it was heavily defeated.

Results from straw polls we have conducted recently indicate young people themselves are fairly evenly split on whether or not the minimum ages should be lowered. However, a significant number of youth and democracy organisations have joined together in a 'Votes at 16' campaign launched in January 2003.

- Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for voting (18)? Why?
- Do you want to see a change in the current minimum age for standing as a candidate (21)? Why?

Options for change

There is a school of thought that believes there should be no fixed minimum age, but most supporters of change accept there should be some fixed age at which voting is permitted, usually 16 or 17.

- If the voting age were to be reduced, what age do you think it should be reduced to? Why?
- Would you advocate the same minimum age for all levels of election in the UK?

For candidacy, most of the issues discussed above are equally relevant, but there is also a particular issue of the relationship between voting and candidacy: should there be any difference between the two minimum ages, and if so why and what should be the extent of that difference?

- If the minimum age for standing as a candidate at UK elections were to be reduced, what age do you think it should be reduced to? Why?
- Would you advocate the same minimum age for all levels of election in the UK?

Further information

The full consultation paper and a 'young people's version' entitled '16-18-21?' are both available on The Electoral Commission's website www.electoralcommission.org.uk or in hard copy from the Commission's offices.

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Executive summary

The Commission believes that voting should be made easier and more convenient for a twenty-first century electorate.

It is necessary to ensure that security measures are in place to maintain the public confidence that is vital to our democracy.

The process of testing innovations in the electoral process is an important one, in terms of delivering improved 'customer service' – to both regular voters and current non-voters – and anticipating future technological and lifestyle changes. Pilot schemes to test innovative voting and counting methods took place in 59 local authorities across England on 1 May 2003. Approximately 6.4 million people were eligible to vote in these pilot areas – over 14% of the English electorate.

The 2003 pilots programme featured an impressive range of schemes. The use of technology was more widespread than in previous years, with 17 schemes offering electors the chance to cast a vote electronically through a variety of channels – on the internet, by telephone, via text messaging and for the first time through interactive digital television. Over half of the schemes offered all-postal voting. Pilot schemes also tested new voting hours and locations. All pilot schemes were well-conducted and successfully delivered an election result.

The Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate any electoral pilot scheme approved by the Government. Following the 2003 pilot programme, we believe that the point has been reached where a distinction can and should be made between the different categories of pilot scheme. We summarise here our conclusions.

All-postal voting

Our evaluation of the all-postal pilot schemes suggests that this approach is effective in boosting participation rates at local elections – to an extent that was largely underestimated when the pilots process first began, and which appears to be sustainable. Indeed, there are real risks that if Returning Officers in areas with repeated experience of all-postal elections are obliged to revert to use of polling stations alone, voters will express considerable frustration and disappointment. There is only very limited evidence of any increase in fraud or electoral offences linked to the use of all-postal ballots, but that is not to say that they are risk-free, any more than a traditional election is.

We have concluded that all-postal elections are ready to be made available at all local government elections in Great Britain, while recognising that the form of local elections in Scotland is a devolved matter.

The measures we recommend in this report are intended to provide a robust basis for enabling all-postal voting to be extended to all local elections as a matter of standard practice, whilst providing for a polling-station based process under exceptional circumstances.

We recommend that:

- There should be a statutory presumption that all local elections be run as all-postal ballots unless there are compelling reasons why an all-postal ballot would be inappropriate or disadvantageous for a group or groups of electors. The final decision should rest with the Returning Officer following consultation with party group leaders and independent members represented on the Council. If polling stations are to be used, the Returning Officer should publish a statement of reasons for the decision at the time of notice of poll.
- The current declaration of identity should be replaced with a new security statement to accompany postal ballots, whether in the context of all-postal elections or otherwise. This security statement should:
 - require the voter to sign a statement that he/she is the individual to whom the ballot paper was addressed;
 - not require any form of witness signature;
 - include a clear explanation of the role and use of the declaration, in particular that it will be separated from the ballot paper before counting can begin and that failure to complete the statement will render a ballot paper invalid;
 - be designed and printed to make it obvious to the voter that this separation will occur.
- Staffed delivery points should be provided as part of the all-postal ballot. The decision on how many staffed delivery points is a matter for the Returning Officer. There should be at least one, and in many cases this may be sufficient. In other cases more may be needed

but in no cases should there be more than the number of wards in which elections are to be held. Delivery points should be permitted in both mobile and fixed locations. To minimise voter confusion, unstaffed delivery points should not be permitted.

- All delivery points must provide electors with the ability to
 - deliver their completed postal vote, or complete their ballot paper in private;
 - receive assistance in completing their ballot if they so desire;
 - access election information in different formats and languages, including the tactile template;
 - have a replacement ballot paper issued.

Staff employed at delivery points must receive training with a focus on the provision of assistance to voters. These staff must also be bound by the secrecy provisions in electoral law.

A statutory requirement should be introduced requiring that all postal ballot papers be sorted 'face down' at the verification stage.

These measures should also be reinforced by the implementation of the Commission's earlier recommendations for increasing the security of postal voting generally:

- There should be a new offence of intending fraudulently to apply for a postal or proxy vote. The maximum penalty should be a custodial sentence in line with the penalties for personation.
- The drafting of the law on undue influence should be revised to clarify the nature of the offence.
- It should also become a legal requirement that secrecy warnings are included on postal and proxy voting literature; these warnings should be specified in law.
- The existing statutory provisions on personation should be extended to give the police the power of arrest, based on 'reasonable suspicion' of personation, at any location, not just at polling stations.

- A new legal provision should be introduced so that in exceptional circumstances, and where the prosecution has demonstrated all due diligence, the court may extend the period in which a prosecution must be brought by up to 12 months.
- There should be more rigorous and routine checks for fraud after significant elections, on the basis of a random audit process.
- The Commission will develop a Code of Practice in relation to the handling of postal ballots by representatives of political parties, in conjunction with political parties. If self-regulation does not prove to be effective, there may be a need for legislative action in the future.

A further integral component of a successful roll-out of all-postal voting is implementation of the Commission's recommendation for a move from household to individual voter registration. Improved funding arrangements for electoral services will also be important in ensuring that all-postal elections can be efficiently and effectively delivered by local authorities.

The 2003 statutory orders for the all-postal pilot schemes in Herefordshire, Gateshead and Stevenage should be used as the starting point for creating a new pilot order. This new pilot order should also take account of the detailed recommendations in this report and should be piloted at local authority by-elections during the remainder of 2003 and in 2004. Subject to the outcome of evaluation, this order should then provide the basis for making all-postal voting available at local elections without pilot status.

We recommend that all-postal voting should not progress beyond pilot status until our wider recommendations for legislative change detailed above are enacted.

Electronic voting

In relation to electronic voting, we are clearly some way from the prospect of an e-enabled general election. We support the Government's vision for a future in which electors have more choice about how they cast their ballot, provided all voting channels available are as secure as (if not more secure than) those traditionally

available. We believe that the primary aim of e-voting pilot schemes is to develop the infrastructure for providing such choice, rather than in the hope of securing short-term increases in turnout. We are clear that there should continue to be tests of electronic voting in order to ensure that in the future, the mechanics of democracy are not regarded by considerable sections of the public as irrelevant and effectively redundant, even if there is widespread adoption of all-postal voting.

However, we do not seek to put a date on when e-voting will be 'ready for roll-out' as there is still insufficient evidence on which to base any such conclusion. We said in our report on the 2002 pilots programme that a clearer strategic direction was needed to demonstrate the key milestones and risks involved in moving towards 'an e-enabled general election some time after 2006'. We remain concerned that there is a need for more detailed planning towards this goal.

We recommend that:

- The Government should – as a priority – develop a detailed road map towards its stated goal, drawing on expertise across the public and private sectors in the successful development of major IT projects. It is important that this road map is in place before the next round of electronic pilots to enable progress to be reported against an agreed long-term project plan.
- Technical requirements for future e-enabled elections should be further developed, based on the existing Statement of Requirements for suppliers of electronic voting and counting services. In particular, the individual requirements should state more specifically the standard that is expected from the solutions. This includes both the overall requirements and the security requirements. There should be stricter controls to ensure that the stated requirements are adhered to.
- The Government should work with the Commission to develop some form of accreditation to ensure that systems meet the agreed requirements and to increase public confidence in the systems used. The accreditation should focus on security issues, but should also cover accessibility issues.

- Specific and more proactive methods for measuring the number of attacks and level of potential fraud should be mandated for future pilots. A full risk assessment should be undertaken for each e-voting service provided.
- A greater involvement in project management, oversight and involvement is required by the local authorities to ensure that the technical components are well integrated into the overall electoral process and that the election is carried out correctly. It is important that Returning Officers and their staff play a larger role in the operation of future electronic voting schemes.
- Future pilots should explore more explicitly the key issue of scalability with respect to the total cost of the services. In the short- to medium-term, the focus of pilot schemes should be the provision of the internet and telephone channels with a view to providing this scalability.
- The text message and digital TV channels currently add limited value to multi-channel pilot schemes. However, as the adoption of these technologies is changing rapidly, some development of these channels should be continued. It is recommended that, in the short-term, the number of digital TV pilots is kept to a minimum and particular consideration is given to the usability issues.
- Future pilots should investigate the use of electronic voting kiosks in a more targeted fashion. Experience to date suggests that kiosks in polling stations do not provide significant cost benefits and future pilots should therefore not use kiosks simply to replace paper ballots in polling stations. However, the use of kiosks at remote locations and combined with early voting should be investigated further; but issues relating to location, position and secrecy of kiosks and the promotion of the scheme should be carefully considered.

Other innovations

There is also a further category of pilot schemes which we describe here as 'other administrative innovations' – those focused on changing the time and location of voting, and those testing innovations designed to improve the efficiency of election management.

We recommend that:

- The use of watermarked or similarly security-printed ballot paper be introduced as a replacement of the stamped official mark to prove a ballot paper's authenticity. This change should also be introduced for other elections at the earliest legislative opportunity.
- The law should be amended to allow for barcodes to be used to replace serial numbers on ballot papers as an interim measure pending completion of the Commission's review of vote-tracing devices. Ballot stationery should clearly describe the role of the barcode, which should always be placed on the back of the ballot paper. This change should also be introduced for other elections at the earliest legislative opportunity.
- Authorities should continue to pilot new times and places for polling, but that any such application must include fully costed promotion plans.
- Pilot schemes directed at providing more information to voters about candidates should be sought by the Government.
- Further pilots of e-counting should be conducted, both to develop a generic Order suitable for implementation more generally and to investigate scalability issues on a regional basis.

Future pilot schemes

For the future of electoral modernisation, pilots will continue to play an important part, in parallel with the implementation of some of the measures whose success has already been demonstrated. In this context, the Commission also notes that, for 2004, the prospect of combined European and local government elections will have a significant impact on the pilots programme. Where elections are held together, piloting can only occur if the current legislation is changed, and will only be practical and feasible if all elections within a European region are conducted on the same basis.



LGIU POLICY BRIEFING

Local Government Information Unit

14 August 2003

107/03

Cycle of local elections: draft LGIU response

Summary

This briefing provides a draft LGIU response to the Electoral Commission consultation on the cycle of local elections in England. Comment by affiliates is invited by 12 September 2003.

Contact: [Jo Dungey](#)

The information in this policy briefing applies to **England only** but the issues raised may be of a wider interest to our affiliates

This policy briefing is produced for our affiliates only. It should not be forwarded or circulated to non-members.

Background

The Electoral Commission has been asked by the government to review the cycle of local elections in England. The Commission has published a discussion paper, which is summarized in policy briefing 080/03.

A draft submission from LGIU is given here. This is based on discussions of the LGIU Executive Committee. Comments on this are welcome from affiliates, preferably by 12 September. We would also like to receive copies of submissions from affiliates to the Commission.

The Electoral Commission will review the responses and other evidence, and publish recommendations to government, by January 2004.

The cycle of local government elections in England: draft response of the LGIU

The LGIU endorses change to the current arrangements for local elections in England. The current pattern of elections is inconsistent, and does not encourage maximum turnout. In summary:

- We support all councils being elected on an all-out basis (all seats elected on the same date).
- There should be a pattern of local elections, with districts, counties, and metropolitan authorities/unitaries being held on successive years, with four year terms. Ideally none of these would be held in a general election year, although to achieve this consistently, this would need a move to a fixed four year term for the House of Commons.

If local government reorganisation is carried out after referenda to establish English regional government, the pattern of local elections should at that point be established consistently for all councils throughout the region.

Further details on our views are given in the answers to the Electoral Commission's questions, below. Although we welcome the Commission's review, the pattern of electoral cycles is only one of the issues which need to be

addressed to improve the turnout in local elections. The LGIU will also be publishing an action plan to improve local turnout, which will set out a wider context and summarise the change we believe needs to take place.

Q1 Should there be a more uniform pattern of local government electoral cycles in England? If so, why?

Yes. We support all local elections being held on an all-out basis (apart from by-elections). Elections for county councils, districts and metropolitan borough councils (with new unitaries being treated as Metropolitan Councils rather than Districts) should be held systematically on successive years. Ideally the fourth year would be the year of the general election.

The current pattern has come about in a piecemeal way and is not logical or defensible. We support change because:

- Election by thirds lowers turnout. It is frequently the case that the election cannot offer the possibility of a change of administration, which lowers public and media interest.
- It would create a more logical pattern of elections, easier for the public and media to understand.
- A more focused pattern of elections, with more at stake, would encourage local campaigning.
- There is no reason for some councils to have an option of election by thirds or all-out and others not to have that choice.
- There would be some decrease in the cost of running local elections, where the current pattern is election by thirds.
- All-out elections can be more easily combined with a flexible pattern of wards, compatible with the geography of the area (e.g. sparsity), with one, two or three member wards within one council.
- Annual elections may encourage short-termism and avoidance of difficult decisions; they also may undermine effective scrutiny in the lead up to elections.

Q2 To what extent should local preferences be taken into account when considering future arrangements for local government electoral cycles?

We think the need to improve turnout and provide consistency is more important than the right of some councils to choose their electoral cycle. Local preferences should not be taken into account on this issue.

Q3 Should the current four-year term of office for local councillors be retained? if not, why?

It should be retained. It seems to provide a reasonable balance between providing scope for an elected administration to implement their policies and see them take effect, and accountability to and judgement by the electorate.

Q4 In areas with more than one tier of local government, should elections to different levels continue to be staggered, or held at the same time? Why?

Both tiers should have all-out elections. These should not be held in the same year (apart from by-elections, if convenient). This would provide greater clarity for the electorate and the media; and provide for focused debate on the particular services for which the council is responsible.

Q5 In developing options for change to the current local government electoral cycle, should the Commission consider the possible future combination of local government elections in England with other national or European elections? If so, why?

We would like to see local elections focus on local issues and provide accountability on the services and decisions for which councilors are genuinely responsible. Currently, local elections are treated too much as opinion polls on national government, by the media and by national politicians and political parties.

It is, therefore, preferable for local elections not to coincide with the general election. However, to achieve a rational programme of elections, there would have to be a move to a fixed term for the House of Commons, removing the present scope of the incumbent government to choose the date of the general election.

European Parliament elections are organized on a five year cycle, Europe wide date, and radically different constituencies from local government. The date of local elections should not be changed to fit in with this. Possibly there is a case for devolved bodies including any new regional assemblies in England to have elections on the same date as local elections.

Q6 Do you have any comments or further evidence on the evidence which we have gathered? In particular we would value any practical experience or local examples of the issues discussed.

We also submit as evidence, survey research carried out for the Commission for Local Governance, on public views on what would encourage them to use their vote.

(NB The survey report is not included with this policy briefing but is available from LGIU on request.)

Q7 In addition to the arguments outlined above, are there any other relevant issues which we should take into account?

If directly elected regional assemblies are introduced in England after referenda, there should be rationalisation of the pattern of local elections. As the government is committed to a completely unitary pattern of local government in such regions, the metropolitan councils and new unitaries should have the same all-out pattern of election and common election date.

More generally, whilst we welcome this review of election cycles, action is needed on many other factors in order to increase local election turnout. LGIU's ten point action plan summarises these (to be attached to submission).

Q8 In considering the simplification of the local government electoral cycle, which issues or arguments are the most important? Why?

Consistency, being clear and rational to the electorate, maximizing election turnout, maximizing media and campaigning interest in local issues and local government.

Why? Local democracy matters and needs to be strengthened.

Jo Dungey

Acting Head of Policy

This briefing has been circulated to Management Committee Representatives, Chief Executives and Leaders

Email distribution category: **corporate**

It can also be found on www.lgiu.gov.uk in the following three categories: constitutional reform, democratic renewal, citizenship

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Q1 Should there be a more uniform pattern of local government electoral cycles in England? If so, why?

Q2 To what extent should local preferences be taken into account when considering future arrangements for local government electoral cycles?

It is perhaps not the job of a London Borough to suggest what pattern of local government elections is held elsewhere, where local circumstances need to be taken into consideration.

However, it can be noted that the continuation of all out elections every 4 years in London is supported. A move away from this system would be unnecessarily confusing for electors. The London model with Greater London Authority / Mayor for London elections every 4 years, 2 years after the council elections give the electorate a say about their local services at the ballot box every 2 years.

We are not able to report any elector-based demand for more frequent elections or a different pattern.

On the other hand, news reports there are elections "across the country" when there are no elections in London does cause some confusion, and Electoral Services take a stream of phone calls from would-be electors waiting on a poll-card.

Q3 Should the current four-year term of office for local councillors be retained? If not, why?

The four year term could be said to provide a reasonable balance between an accountability to the electorate and providing enough time for an administration to implement their policies.

Q4 In areas with more than one tier of local government, should elections to different levels continue to be staggered, or held at the same time? Why?

Q5 In developing options for change to the current local government electoral cycle, should the Commission consider the possible future combination of local government elections in England with other national or European elections? If so, why?

It seems desirable, if electors are to focus on the relevant local issues at a local government election, for the election to not be combined with either elections for other tiers of local government or with other national or European Union elections where possible.

Q6 Do you have any comments or further evidence on the evidence which we have gathered? In particular, we would value any practical experience or local examples of the issues discussed.

Q7 In addition to the arguments outlined above, are there any other relevant issues which we should take into account?

No.

Q8 In considering the simplification of the local government electoral cycle, which issues or arguments are the most important? Why?

In order to legitimize local democracy, maximizing election turnout is most important. A confusing and poorly understood pattern of elections would be to the detriment of turnout.