

Cycle of local government elections in England

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.

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.
Tel: 020 7271 0500

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