

SMC Topic Review

The effect of a Local Authority's Electoral Cycle on Voter Turnout



Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 In 2006/07 the Scrutiny Management Commission (SMC) conducted a review aimed at identifying ways to increase electoral registration in Derby. As a result of the review, the Commission made recommendations regarding the Council's election processes at Derby.

As a logical extension of that review the Commission decided to conduct a further review to examine the effect a local authority's election cycle had on levels of voter turnout.

Research has demonstrated that altering the election cycle can affect voter turnout.

Why look at this? Why now?

- 1.2 Declining voter numbers leave local authorities open to the argument that they are unrepresentative of the people they serve. The Local Government White Paper 2006 makes the Government's position clear:

"Local Government derives both its representative mandate and its leadership legitimacy from its democratic mandate. But local democracy has been the weaker and local government the poorer because of the low electoral turnout in many authorities."

- 1.3 The SMC's previous review focused on increasing electoral registration at Derby. However, once this task has been accomplished voters may still not use their vote. One factor which may influence voter turnout is the electoral cycle of an authority.
- 1.4 The Electoral Commission explored the relationship between different electoral cycles and voter turnout in 2003. Following extensive research, it recommended to the Government that whole council elections would increase voter turnout, provide a clearer system for voters and make the system equitable for all.
- 1.5 The Government White Paper 2006 - Strong and Prosperous Communities 'Gives (local authorities) freedom to opt for whole council elections'. It is proposed that the rules regarding a change in electoral cycle be relaxed to allow Councils to move to four yearly whole council elections. The White Paper led to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2006 which sets out the processes for a Council to change the electoral cycle.
- 1.6 This review aims to look at evidence for the differences in voter turnout in different types of electoral cycle.

Research

- 1.7 Evidence for this review has come from three main sources.
- Firstly, The Electoral Commission which conducted a detailed review on the relationship between electoral cycle and voter turnout in January 2003.
- 1.8 In addition, questionnaires were sent to all Unitary Authorities to ascertain their recent election results and views on the advantages and disadvantages of the current electoral cycle.
- 1.9 Questionnaires were also sent to the Group Leaders at Derby City Council asking for their views on the current electoral cycle at Derby and also on the four yearly whole council electoral cycle. The only response to the questionnaire was received from the Liberal Democrat Group.

Summary of findings

Turnout Figures

- 1.10 The Electoral Commission's 2003 study concluded that local authorities which held whole council elections had higher turnout figures than those who held elections by thirds.
- 1.10 The average turnout figures collected from the Unitary Authorities who responded to the questionnaire supported the Electoral Commission's research as on average whole council elections produce a 4.23 percentage point higher turnout than elections by thirds.

Cost

- 1.12 This review has found that if Derby City Council were to move to whole Council elections once every four years there is a potential saving of around £362,000 for administering local elections over a four-year period.

Political Will for Change

- 1.13 The political will for change at Derby City Council has not been clearly determined as only one response was received to the questionnaire sent to the main political parties at Derby.

Suggested Recommendations to Council

- 1.14 The Scrutiny Management Commission needs to agree whether the potential increase in voter turnout, together with the potential cost savings, are sufficient to justify a change to four yearly elections.
- 1.15 If the Commission agrees there should be a change to a four yearly election cycle at Derby City Council, the Commission should recommend to the Council that based on the findings of this review, once the power is available following the enactment of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill the Council should look to alter the electoral cycle in Derby from elections by thirds to four yearly elections.

Full Report

Aims and Objectives of the Review

- 2.1 The primary objective of this review was to see whether there were any significant differences in voter turnout between those Councils that elect by thirds and those with four yearly election cycles.
- 2.2 Additionally, information about the relative costs of the two different systems and about administrative/political benefits or disbenefits of the two systems was sought as it was thought this would support any recommendations to either maintain the status quo or change the electoral cycle at Derby City Council.

Terms of Reference

- 2.3 The terms of reference of the review were:

	Issue	Action
a.	To establish the baseline information for Derby on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Voter turnout• Election costs• Political and administrative views on present system• Political and administrative views on moving to four yearly elections	Interviews with relevant officers and political group leaders
b.	To consider available information on the effect of election cycles on voter turnout in England	Electoral Commission reports and Internet search
c.	To establish, so far as is possible, the effect of election cycles on voter turnout in other Unitary Authorities	Develop a questionnaire and survey the other Unitary Authorities identified in the Electoral Commission's report 'The cycle of local Government elections in England', and compare the level of voter turnout for those which elect by thirds and those on four yearly elections

Methodology

- 3.1 At the SMC meeting on 26 June members agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordination Officers should conduct the review and should present a report on their findings to the Commission's meeting on 18 September 2007.
- 3.2 There were seen to be three distinct stages to the review:
 1. Interviews/questionnaires with relevant officers and political group leaders
 2. Examination of information from the Electoral Commission and other sources
 3. Development of a questionnaire and survey of Unitary Authorities in England

Timetable

- 3.3 It was planned that a report on the review was to be provided to the SMC meeting on 18 September.

Election Cycles – a brief history

- 4.1 In order to understand the different types of electoral cycle and the benefits and disbenefits of each respective system, it is worth exploring the history of election cycles.
- 4.2 Since the reorganisation of local government in the early 1970's, election cycles have evolved in different ways resulting in different local authorities holding different types of election, at different times.
- 4.3 Over the years three main trends have emerged:
 - a. Whole Council elections every four years
- All seats come up for election at the same time once every four years.
 - b. Election by thirds
A third of the Council is elected each year for three years and in the fourth year there are no Council elections.
 - c. Election by halves
Half of the Council is elected bi-annually with no elections taking place in the alternate years.

Electoral Cycle Reform

- 4.4 The Government stated in its 2001 White Paper – Strong Local Leadership that ‘The current electoral cycle is confusing’.
- 4.5 Following this, in January 2003, the Secretary of State asked the Electoral Commission to ‘review and report on the cycle of local government elections in England, identifying options for change that would simplify the current election system’.

Electoral Commission Review

- 4.6 The Electoral Commission’s review looked at how public perceptions of local elections, participation in local elections and the performance of local authorities were affected by different types of electoral cycle.

They did this by:

- collecting evidence from the public on their opinions about the different electoral cycles in operation across England;
- working with the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth to undertake statistical analysis of the relationship between voter turnout and different types of electoral cycle and finally;
- examining whether the type of electoral cycle affected the performance of local authorities.

Electoral Commission Conclusions and Recommendations

- 4.7 The Electoral Commission published their findings in January 2004.

The Commission concluded that there was ‘significant evidence of confusion and misunderstanding’ amongst voters concerning local authority elections. They felt that the different electoral cycles across England ‘did not help electors to understand the opportunities open to them (to engage) in the democratic process.’

- 4.8 They also expressed concerns that the mix of electoral cycles led to inequalities in opportunities to vote, both between different authorities and at times within authorities between different wards. It was felt that this was both ‘fundamentally unfair’ and ‘unacceptable’.
- 4.9 The Commission recommended to the Government that ‘...the Cycle of local... ..elections should follow a clear and consistent pattern, within and across local authorities.’
- 4.10 Their research led them to also recommend that ‘...each local authority in England should hold whole council elections, with all councillors elected simultaneously, once every four years.’

4.11 Some of the reasons for this recommendation were:

- whole council elections would provide stability and clarity for voters
- voters would have equal opportunities for participation in the democratic process

4.12 The Commission's recommendations and conclusions are detailed further in Appendix 1.

4.13 As an aside it is worth noting that the Commission also concluded that it was '...not clear whether there is a direct relationship between the electoral cycle of an authority and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) judgements produced by the Audit Commission. The CPA reports make it clear that a broad range of structural or political factors may influence the capacity of local authorities to deliver their responsibilities and it is not clear that the electoral cycle of local authorities has been a significant factor in these assessments.'

Government Action

4.14 The Local Government White Paper 2006 does not suggest that whole council elections every four years should be compulsory. Instead it proposes the removal of the requirement to get the Secretary of State's permission to move to whole council elections for any council that currently elects by thirds.

4.15 The White Paper led to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2006 which sets out the processes for a Council to change the electoral cycle.

4.16 The Bill is still currently at the Lord's Committee stage in Parliament.

Current Situation in Derby City Council

5.1 Derby City Council currently operates under a cycle of elections by thirds.

5.2 There has been a tradition of elections by thirds at Derby City Council going back to the reorganisation of Local Government in 1972 and even prior to that.

5.3 There are currently 172,780 people on the electoral register at Derby with 21,872 of those people registered as holding a postal vote.

5.4 Turnout levels at Derby since 2003 have been as follows:

- 1990 – 51.2%
- 1991 – 46.3%
- 1992 – 40.8%
- 1994 – 43.4%
- 1995 – 37.3%
- 1996 – 36.2% (Whole Council Election)
- 1998 – 27.1%
- 1999 – 29.3%
- 2000 – 27.6%
- 2002 – 33.3% (Whole Council Election)
- 2003 – 30.6%
- 2004 – 48.4% (All Postal)
- 2005 – 61.76% (Parliamentary Election)
- 2006 – 35.7%
- 2007 – 35.1%

Electoral Services report that the figures for 2006 and 2007 are fairly typical turnout levels for the City.

5.5 In an attempt to increase voter turnout the Council has, over recent years, used the following methods to increase public awareness about local elections in Derby,:

- Leaflet drops
- Posters
- Bus advertising
- Cinema advertising
- Radio advertising
- Ad-vans

5.6 The costs of the 2007 election day at Derby City Council can be broken down as follows (Due to the installation of a new financial reporting system these figures are subject to confirmation):

Room Hire	£11,195.58
Polling Staff Fees	£76,343.00
Equipment	£10,545.53
Vehicle Hire	£6,172.57
Agency Staff	£12,313.35
Publicity	£4,314.19
Other hired/contract services	£ 60,000.00
<u>Total</u>	<u>£180,884.22</u>

5.7 It is likely that the costs of running elections will increase in future years. This will be due to the increase in security measures required for proof of identity of postal voters and electoral processes become more complicated.

- 5.8 During the last Re-Warding process in 2001/02, the Council decided to remain with the current system of elections by thirds.
- 5.9 All three main political parties on the Council expressed a wish to remain with elections by thirds at that time.
- 5.10 All three main political parties were sent a copy of the questionnaire attached in Appendix 2. The questionnaire asked for the Parties views about the advantages and disadvantages of the current electoral system for both their Party and for the City of Derby.
- 5.11 The only response to the questionnaire was received from the Liberal Democrat Group. Their response is included in Appendix 2a.

Research

Questionnaire to all Unitary Authorities

- 6.1 On 30 July 2007, all 46 English Unitary Authorities were emailed the questionnaire found in appendix 3.
- 6.2 In total 14 responses were received.
- 6.3 Of those who responded 6 Authorities held elections by thirds every three years and 7 held whole Council elections every four years. Hartlepool Council followed a pattern of elections every year and therefore did not submit a full response.

Questions asked and responses

- 6.4 Details of all the responses received can be found in appendix 4

Advantages and disadvantages of different electoral cycles

- 6.5 The electoral officers who responded to the questionnaires were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of each electoral cycle.
- 6.6 Their responses include:

Four yearly cycle advantages:

- Costs are less than for a three yearly cycle
- There is more continuity in the Council as the majority party has longer mandate
- It is a clearer system for the electorate

Four yearly cycle disadvantages

- Hard to keep up with changes to electoral legislation/administration
- Huge 'peak' in work loads/budgets every four years
- Difficult to find experienced staff
- Councillors and Candidates forget how the process works

Advantages to elections by thirds cycle

- Electorate get to vote each year on recent performance
- Keeps procedures fresh/keeps 'hand in' at doing elections

Disadvantages to elections by thirds cycle

- Cost
- Rarely get quiet periods to do extra work eg polling district review
- Voter fatigue
- 'hard to keep on top of constant cycle'

6.7 The Electoral Commission documents further arguments in favour of each type of electoral cycle:

Elections by thirds

- 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

Whole Council elections

- Greater possibility for wholesale change may encourage greater 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.

Costs

6.8 This review's terms of reference included gathering information regarding costs of elections.

6.9 The questionnaire asked Unitary Authorities for details of costs for an election day (excluding day to day staffing costs and other costs associated with elections like postage and printing as this would be affected by the number of postal voters etc).

6.10 It must be noted that many of the figures are not directly comparable with Derby City Council's costs as they are classed by different Councils under different headings and allocated from different budgets.

6.11 Additionally, some of the authorities in the survey did not provide a full breakdown of their costs so it is difficult to ascertain what factors have been included in their overall figure.

- 6.12 Due to the small sample of data collected, it is difficult to determine how the costs of running an election at Derby are comparable with that of other similar sized Unitary Authorities.
- 6.13 Further details of the responses from the unitary councils can be found in the table in Appendix 5.
- 6.14 It is clear that the costs of holding a whole council election once every four years are less than holding elections in three out of every four years simply because there are fewer elections.
- 6.15 Based on this year's figures, if Derby City Council were to move to whole Council elections once every four years there is a potential saving of approximately £362,000 for administering local elections in Derby over the four-year period.

Political Will to Change Electoral Cycle

- 6.16 The questionnaire asked whether other Unitary Authorities had considered a change in their electoral cycles at a political level.
- 6.17 From the 14 responses received, 10 Councils had not considered changing their electoral cycle at a political level (Hartlepool did not respond).
- 6.18 Southampton and Woking BC were currently considering changing their electoral cycle from election by thirds to whole council elections.

Following a political review, North East Lincolnshire had changed from whole council elections to elections by thirds in 2003.

Topic Review Findings and Conclusions

Turnout Figures

- 7.1 The turnout figures for the Unitary Authorities who responded to the questionnaire are detailed in the table and charts in appendices 6 and 7.
- 7.2 The figures show that whole council elections have on average a 4.23% point higher turnout than elections by thirds.
- 7.3 It is important to remember that these figures are based on a very small sample.
- 7.4 This finding does, however, support the Electoral Commission's 2003 study. The study found that even when a number of social, economic and political variables had been taken into account, 'turnout remained lower in authorities that elect by thirds than for authorities that hold whole council elections.'

Cost

- 7.5 This review has found that whilst comparison of election costs between authorities is difficult, based on the 2007 cost figures, if Derby City Council were to move to whole Council elections once every four years there is a potential saving of around £362,000 for administering local elections over a four-year period.

Political Will for Change

- 7.6 The political will for change at Derby City Council has not been determined as responses are not yet available to the questionnaire sent to the main political parties at Derby.

Recommendations

- 8.1 The Scrutiny Management Commission needs to agree whether the potential increase in voter turnout and a potential cost saving is sufficient to justify a change to 4 yearly elections.
- 8.2 If the Commission agrees there should be a change to a 4 yearly election cycle at Derby City Council, the Commission should recommend to the Council that based on the findings of this review the Council should look to alter the electoral cycle in Derby from elections by thirds to four yearly elections.

Appendices

1.	Electoral Commission Cycle of Local Government Elections in England Executive Summary 2004
2a.	Questionnaire sent to three main political party Group Leaders at Derby City Council
2b.	Responses to questionnaire sent to Group Leaders (only one response was received from the Liberal Democrat Group)
3.	Questionnaire sent to all Unitary Authorities in England
4.	Responses to Unitary Authority Questionnaire
5.	Costs of Unitary Authorities' Last Election Day
6.	Table of % Turnout figures from Authorities who responded to questionnaire
7.	Graph of % Turnout figures