

CABINET

1 October 2003

THE CYCLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN ENGLAND

REPORT OF CITY SECRETARY AND SOLICITOR

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Although all Councillors serve a four year term of office, the cycle of elections can vary between election by thirds, halves or the whole Council. The Electoral Commission is undertaking a consultation exercise to ascertain opinions on whether the current situation should continue, or whether a simplified system should be introduced.

The deadline for comments is 3 October 2003 and the Commission proposes to submit its findings to the Deputy Prime Minister by 29 January 2004.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Electoral Commission be informed that the City Council would wish the current 'election by thirds' system to continue, for the reasons given in response to the eight questions posed by the Commission, all as set out in this report.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Since local government reorganisation in 1974, the City Council has operated on an 'election by thirds' basis – i.e there is a City Council election each May for three consecutive years, followed by a year with no City Council election (but in which the County Council election is held). After that, the pattern starts again.
- 1.2 Had it wished, the City Council could have opted for an election of the whole Council once every four years, or for half the Council once every two years. The County Council elects all its members once every four years.
- 1.3 Although not part of this review, it should be mentioned for completeness that a Parliament is elected for five years, but for the General Elections in 1997 and 2001, the Government chose to call an election after four years and combine it with the County Council elections. A similar situation will arise in 2004, with the District elections being postponed until 10 June 2004, in order that they can be held on the same day as the European Parliamentary Elections. Members of the European Parliament are elected for a five year term of office, which is a fixed period.

2 The Consultation Exercise

- 2.1 The Electoral Commission requested MORI to carry out an opinion survey in April 2003, which indicated that there was widespread public confusion and lack of knowledge about when local elections are held. More than half the respondents incorrectly identified how often local elections were held and 32% did not know at all.
- 2.2 Research undertaken at the University of Plymouth indicates that differences in turnout do exist between local authorities using alternative electoral cycles. The research suggests that, in theory, the turnout in 'whole council' elections could decline if elections became more frequent, and that turnout could increase in areas of 'election by thirds' if councils changed to less frequent elections.
- 2.3 The Commission has posed all local authorities eight questions to help it reach a conclusion and these are set out below, together with a response to each.
- 2.4 It is recommended that these responses form the basis of the City Council's formal reply to the Commission, subject to any comments or amendments which Members may have.

3 Questions posed by the Electoral Commission

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

Only if there was evidence to show that electors would be more likely to vote if, for example, there was an annual "Election Day". Currently the first Thursday in May is allocated for Local Government elections, but European Parliamentary elections are held in June and the dates of Parliamentary elections are not programmed in advance. Although a uniform pattern of electoral cycles may benefit elections administration, it is doubtful that just knowing the date well in advance would, of itself, make those disinclined to vote change their minds.

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

There should be local preference, particularly where a Council can demonstrate that its current cycle has helped to generate (or at least not hindered) reasonable turnout figures. Around 42% of the local electorate each year take the opportunity to express its views via the ballot box in the Winchester District, which is a good figure compared to many other authorities and shows that election by thirds is not always a 'turn off' because of voter fatigue, and it depends very much on the locality. Elections by thirds enable the Council to be regularly held accountable to its electorate.

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

Yes. A four year period is a reasonable term which achieves the essential balance between Members having sufficient time to learn and develop their roles as representatives of the local community, and the need to provide the electorate with regular opportunities to express their views.

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

They should continue to be staggered. Currently, combined elections for City and Parish Council elections are held on the same day when necessary. To add a County Council contest on the same day would probably create voter confusion and voter apathy when faced with three ballot papers!

3.5 **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?**

The combination of local and national elections has advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include:-

- (a) Potential for increased turnout for local elections;
- (b) potential cost savings;

- (c) less disruption to schools which are commonly used as polling stations (although not an issue for the City Council as no schools are used); and
- (d) a reduction in the problem of recruitment of suitable election day staff (i.e. there is still likely to be a problem but it would happen less often).

Disadvantages include:

- (a) potential for voting patterns to change, with voters casting votes at local elections for the same party as in the more dominant, national election. The impact of local issues on local elections could be lost as a consequence.
- (b) voters tend to be confused when faced with more than one ballot paper – this is compounded where different voting methods are used at different elections (e.g. first past the post for a local election and the closed list system for European elections).
- (c) the apathy currently shown towards European elections might impact on local election turnout if these elections were combined (2004 will provide a test).
- (d) combined elections are complex to run from an administrative point of view.
- (e) if combination of elections is to be the norm, terms of office of local councillors should be adjusted to conform with the June European Parliament Elections.

On balance the City Council does not favour combined elections (other than with parishes) unless a fixed date is also used for Parliamentary elections.

3.6 Do you have any further 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.

One practical issue is that the review of ward boundaries undertaken by the City Council in 2000 had full regard to the 'election by thirds' model and the Council managed to achieve a sensible order of retirement, with exactly one third of the Members retiring each year. It would be unfortunate if the work so recently undertaken had to be done again to introduce a new arrangement especially when, judging by turnout levels, there is no problem with the existing system.

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

The Council did consider electoral cycles when carrying out the boundary review of 2000 mentioned above. It was concluded that the system of election by thirds provided considerable democratic benefits, because it allowed the District's electorate an opportunity to vote three years out of four and provide an indication of how it viewed the performance of the Council and/or local Members. It also meant that prospective candidates did not have to wait up to four years to get their chance to serve the community.

There is also the advantage of gradual change, which means that should there be a large political swing away from any party, with a consequent influx of new Members, it is limited to one third of the Council and there is still an experienced core of Members to serve on committees etc. However, with whole Council elections (every four years) there have been past cases where a dramatic political shift has meant a significant loss of experienced Members.

In summary, the democratic advantages and relative stability of 'one third' elections outweighs any disadvantages and it should remain an option for those Councils who wish to operate in that way. It also ensures regular accountability of the Council to its electorate.

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

The main issue is local flexibility and allowing each local authority to have the electoral system which best suits its electorate. The key test for this should be the turnout levels achieved, particularly for those Councils advocating a retention of the 'election by thirds' system. If those Councils can demonstrate good turnout compared to the national average, they should be allowed to continue with that system.

Whilst the apparent attractions of fewer elections in terms of cost and avoiding voter fatigue can be appreciated, it is not considered that they would generate higher turnout figures. In an area such as the Winchester District, voters may well resent not being able to make their views known through the ballot box on an annual basis.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

4 CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

To be more open and democratic.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 5.1 The only resource implication would be a reduction in costs if local elections were held less frequently. The average cost of a 'one third' City Council election is about £48,000.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None.

APPENDICES:

None.