

The
Electoral
Commission

The cycle of local government elections in England

Consultation paper
July 2003



The Electoral Commission

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

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How to respond

Please send your response to this consultation paper by **Friday 3 October 2003** to:

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Respondents should make clear whether their submission is on behalf of a particular group or organisation, or if it is an individual or personal response.

The Electoral Commission may wish to publish or make available for inspection responses to this consultation paper. Please ensure that your response is marked clearly if you wish your response or your name to remain confidential.

Contents

Consultation summary	6
1 Introduction	9
2 The current local government electoral cycle in England	13
3 Evidence	20
4 The case for and against partial or whole council elections	28
Appendices	
1 Request pursuant to Section 6(2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and Terms of Reference	32
2 Background to the current local government electoral cycle in England	34
3 Schedule of current local government electoral cycles in England	39

Executive summary

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 thawthorn@electoralcommission.org.uk 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 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 able 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?*

1 Introduction

Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to invite views and evidence to inform The Electoral Commission's review of the cycle of local government elections in England. It also includes information on a number of issues to inform responses to consultation.
- 1.2 Responses to this paper must be received by **Friday 3 October 2003**. Instructions for respondents are at the front of this paper.

Background

- 1.3 In its white paper *Strong local leadership – quality public services*,¹ 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.

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.
- 1.4 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.² 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 must assess the desirability and practicality of any options for change, and must also make recommendations for the implementation of those options.
- 1.5 The request specifies that The Electoral Commission's report must be presented to the Deputy Prime Minister no later than 12 months after the date of the request. We will therefore submit our final report by Thursday 29 January 2004. The request also outlines 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.
- 1.6 This is the first review to be undertaken by The Electoral Commission in response to a formal request submitted under section 6(2) of PERA. However, following the 2001 general election, we initiated a broad programme of policy reviews examining electoral matters, in accordance with section 6(1) of PERA. The agenda for this review programme was set

¹ Cm 5237.

² Section 6(2) Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

out in our statutory report on the 2001 election, and in June 2003 we published an overview report outlining our conclusions and recommendations for changes to electoral law.

Scope

- 1.7 In undertaking this review, The Electoral Commission is mindful of the scope and terms of reference which are clearly outlined in the formal request submitted by the Secretary of State. Under the terms of the request, the Commission must review and report on the cycle of local government elections in England, such elections being the normal elections for:
- principal authorities – districts (including unitary authorities and metropolitan boroughs), London boroughs and counties;
 - the Greater London Authority;
 - elected mayors; and
 - parish councils.
- 1.8 We also note that the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act 2003, which received Royal Assent in May 2003, has outlined the process by which regional assemblies may in future be established. In particular, we note that the structure of local government beneath any future regional assembly will wholly comprise a pattern of unitary authorities. It is anticipated that new unitary authorities would replace the existing pattern of district and county councils in the two-tier areas of the region, while existing unitary authorities and metropolitan districts would remain largely unchanged. In carrying out this review of electoral cycles The Electoral Commission will be mindful of the possible future establishment of elected regional assemblies, but cannot directly consider them within the scope of this review.
- 1.9 The terms of reference specified by the Government's request outline a range of matters to which The Electoral Commission must have regard in carrying out this review. These include 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.
- The terms of reference are set out in full in Appendix 1.
- 1.10 We are also aware of the need to consider the relationship between different local government elections in related areas, and between local government elections and other elections in England (elections to the Westminster and European parliaments). The Government has recently concluded consultation on proposals to combine local and GLA elections with elections to the European Parliament in June 2004. In considering this potential combination of elections, The Electoral Commission's response noted the importance of striking a balance between the potential benefits of combination (maximising turnout, removing inconvenience) and any

disadvantages (confusing or obscuring the issues at stake, administrative practicalities).³ However, without the opportunity to assess in practice the implications of combining elections in 2004, we did not feel it appropriate to form a conclusive view on the principle of combination. This review of the local electoral cycle will provide an opportunity to consider in more detail issues relating to the principle of the combination of elections.

- 1.11 Under the terms of the Secretary of State's request, the Commission is not limited to consideration of these matters alone, and may take into account other relevant matters. The questions for consultation outlined in Chapter 6 of this report outline the key issues that we consider are most relevant to the work of this review. Nevertheless, we will also take into account any additional relevant evidence or arguments from respondents which will add to our understanding of the issues involved in this review.
- 1.12 In considering any options for change to the current cycle of local government elections in England, our recommendations may involve changes to:
- councillors' terms of office;
 - local authorities' electoral arrangements in England,⁴ including:
 - the number of councillors for the local authority area;
 - the boundaries of wards or divisions for the area;
 - the number of wards or divisions for the area.
- 1.13 The scope of this review does not include recommendations for changes to the voting system for local government in England. We note that the Greater London Assembly presently uses the Alternative Vote and Additional Member systems to elect the Mayor and Assembly respectively, and that elected mayors elsewhere are chosen using the Single Transferable Vote system. We also recognise that changes to the voting system for local government in Scotland have recently been proposed, and that local elections in Northern Ireland have for some time been conducted using the single transferable vote system. The possible future introduction of voting systems other than first past the post for local government elections in England may have implications for the timing of those elections. However, where alternative voting systems are not yet in place, we will not consider their potential role as part of this review.

Review process

- 1.14 This paper has been developed by Commission staff 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 Commissioners, Joan Jones CBE and Professor Michael Clarke CBE. It also includes evidence from an opinion survey conducted by MORI in April 2003 on behalf of the Commission, and statistical analysis of local election turnout by the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth.

³ The full text of the Commission's response can be downloaded from our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk

⁴ As defined by Section 14 of the Local Government Act 1992.

- 1.15 As outlined above, the Commission must conclude its review by the end of January 2004. Following publication of this evidence and consultation paper, we will undertake public consultation in a variety of ways, until early October 2003. In particular, responses to this consultation paper must be received by **Friday 3 October 2003**. Instructions for respondents are included at the front of this paper. We will carefully consider the views and evidence submitted to us during this period, before formulating options for change to the current cycle of local government elections in England. We will take full account of all responses to consultation in determining our recommendations on those options.
- 1.16 In addition to receiving formal responses to the consultation issues and questions in this paper, we will also be speaking directly to a wide range of stakeholder groups during the period of public consultation in the summer and autumn 2003. While we have endeavoured to identify an appropriately wide and representative range of groups and organisations, we recognise that many others may wish to discuss their views with us directly. We would be pleased to consider arranging further opportunities for consultation with any interested groups or individuals, and any such groups should contact Tom Hawthorn at the address given on page 3 of this report in the first instance.
- 1.17 We will submit our final report, including our recommendations, to the Secretary of State by 29 January 2004. We will also publish our report and make it available on our website.

2 The current local government electoral cycle in England

- 2.1 The current cycle of local government elections in England is by no means straightforward. There is no clear or consistent pattern of elections, and electors face a wide variation in the range of opportunities to participate in local elections, depending on the area in which they live. For more information on the history of local electoral arrangements, see Appendix 2 'Background to the current local government electoral cycle in England'.

London

- 2.2 Local government in London comprises a total of 33 local authorities, including the Corporation of London, beneath the city-wide Greater London Authority (GLA). The 32 London boroughs hold simultaneous whole council elections every four years. The GLA also elects all of its representatives, including the Mayor of London, once every four years. Elections to the London boroughs and the GLA are staggered, held in alternate even years (London borough elections in 2002, GLA elections in 2004 and so on). The Corporation of London is unique among English local authorities in holding whole council elections every year, in December.
- 2.3 London boroughs are not required to have a uniform pattern of wards or members, and are not restricted as to the number of councillors that represent each ward. However, London boroughs currently return predominantly three-member wards, with only nine two-member wards and one single-member ward. Under new arrangements, which will come into effect from 2004, each of the 25 wards of the Corporation of London will return one Alderman and not more than nine members to the Court of Common Council.

Metropolitan boroughs

- 2.4 A total of 36 metropolitan borough councils are responsible for delivering local government services in the large metropolitan areas of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne & Wear, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire. While members serve for four years, all metropolitan borough councils are elected by thirds. One third of seats are elected in each of three years of a four-year electoral cycle, and in the fourth year no elections are held.
- 2.5 In accordance with the Local Government Act of 1972, all wards in metropolitan boroughs must return a number of councillors which is divisible by three. Currently all wards return three councillors.

Unitary authorities

- 2.6 Outside London and the metropolitan areas, some local government services are also delivered by unitary single tier authorities. There are a total of 46 unitary councils in England, of which 19 elect by thirds and 27 hold whole council elections every four years. Unitary authorities are not required to have a uniform pattern of wards or members, and are not restricted as to

the number of councillors which represent each ward. However, all unitary authorities currently return between one and three councillors per ward.

Shire district and borough councils

- 2.7 In the majority of non-metropolitan areas in England, a two-tier system of local government provides local service delivery through both county councils and district or borough councils. There are a total of 238 district or borough councils in England, but there is no clear pattern of electoral cycle within these authorities. Eighty-three district or borough councils elect by thirds, while 149 hold whole council elections every four years. Since 2000, the Secretary of State has made orders under the Local Government Act 2000 to provide for six authorities to hold elections by halves (with elections for half of all seats taking place every other year).
- 2.8 Shire districts and boroughs are not required to have a uniform pattern of wards or members, and are not restricted as to the number of councillors which represent each ward. However, all shire districts or boroughs currently return between one and three councillors per ward.

County councils

- 2.9 A total of 34 county councils in England form the second tier of local government which covers all 238 district or borough councils. All county councils hold whole council elections for all seats every four years. At present, each county council division returns a single councillor. However, since 2000, The Boundary Committee for England (BCfE) may now recommend the creation of multi-member county divisions. Under the current review programme of the BCfE, multi-member divisions may be introduced in some counties from 2005.

Parish councils

- 2.10 At the most local level of government in England are approximately 8,700 parish councils. Elections to parish councils must take place once every four years, in the same year as elections to the principal authority ward in which they are located, regardless of the type of the principal authority. Where elections to the principal authority are held by thirds, therefore, parish council elections might be held in each of the three election years of the electoral cycle. There is no maximum limit to the number of members a parish council may have, but there must be at least five.

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

Authority type	Thirds	Halves	Wholes	Total
County council	-	-	34	34
District/borough council	83	6	149	238
Unitary council	19	-	27	46
London borough	-	-	33	33
Metropolitan borough	36	-	-	36
Parish and town councils	-	-	7,800	7,800

Mayoral elections

- 2.11 The Local Government Act 2000 provided for the introduction of modernised political management structures in local authorities in England, including the option for a constitution including a directly elected executive mayor. To date, 11 local authorities in England have chosen to introduce elected mayors: three district or borough councils, three unitary councils, two metropolitan boroughs and three London boroughs.
- 2.12 Executive mayors are elected using the supplementary vote system, and elections are held either on the first Thursday in May or the third Thursday in October in the relevant electoral year, dependent on when the referendum to establish the office was held in each authority. Elected mayors will serve for a period of four years from the date of their election.

Term of office

- 2.13 Regardless of the individual electoral cycle of local authorities, all local government representatives in England currently serve a four-year term of office.

Current legal requirements and responsibilities

- 2.14 Prior to the transfer of its functions to The Electoral Commission, the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE) could make recommendations to the Secretary of State for changes to the electoral cycle of shire districts or unitary districts as part of its Periodic Electoral Review process. Under amendments made to the Local Government Act 1992 by the Local Government Commission for England (Transfer of Functions) Order 2001, the power to make such recommendations was removed from its successor The Boundary Committee for England.
- 2.15 The Local Government Act 2000 gave powers to the Secretary of State to introduce by Order schemes of elections for county councils, districts or London borough councils which would include whole council elections, elections by thirds or elections by halves. The Secretary of State may also, by Order, change the years in which elections take place for county councils, districts or London borough councils. Metropolitan districts must, however, hold elections by thirds.⁵

The frequency of local elections

- 2.16 As detailed above, there is no clear or uniform 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. Moreover, this disparity is also repeated *within* some local authority areas, where electors may be offered fewer or greater opportunities to vote depending on the size of the individual ward in which they live. Table 2 summarises the frequency of opportunities to vote available to electors in different areas of England.

⁵ Section 7 Local Government Act 1972.

- 2.17 Electors in London are offered the opportunity to vote in local elections every two years: once every four years in borough council elections (in 2002, 2006 etc for example), and once every four years in elections to the GLA (in 2004, 2008 etc.). However those electors in the Corporation of London area vote every year, and also vote once every four years in elections to the GLA.

Table 2: Summary of frequency of local elections in England, by authority and ward type

Local authority type and electoral cycle	Ward size	Frequency of voting in each 4-year cycle	
London (including elections to GLA)	London borough	2 years out of 4	
	Corporation of London	Every year, twice in year 2	
Single tier	Metropolitan boroughs, by thirds	3 years out of 4	
	Unitary authorities, by thirds	Single-member	1 year out of 4
		Two-member	2 years out of 4
		Three-member	3 years out of 4
	Unitary authorities, whole-council	One, two or three-member	1 year out of 4
Two tier (including elections to county councils)	District/borough council, by thirds	Single-member	2 years out of 4
		Two-member	3 years out of 4
		Three-member	Every year
	District/borough council, by halves	Single-member	2 years out of 4
		Two- or three-member	3 years out of 4
	District/borough council, whole-council	One, two or three-member	2 years out of 4

- 2.18 All electors in metropolitan borough areas are given the opportunity to vote in local elections in three years of a four-year cycle, with one year fallow.
- 2.19 In unitary authority areas the frequency with which electors are offered the opportunity to vote is dependent not only on the electoral cycle of the authority but also, in some cases, on the size of the 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, those 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.
- 2.20 Similarly, in two-tier shire areas, the frequency with which electors are able to vote can also depend on the size of the ward. All electors will be able to vote in county council elections once every four years. Electors in areas which hold whole council elections may also vote in the second of the three remaining years of the electoral cycle. However, in two-tier areas where

members are elected by thirds, those 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), those in two-member wards may vote three times, and those in three-member wards may vote in all four years of the cycle.

- 2.21 In the relatively small number of shire authorities that elect by halves, the pattern is of predominantly two-member wards (within the six authorities there are no single-member wards and only one three-member ward). In these areas almost all electors will be able to vote in three out of four-years: twice in district or borough council elections and once in county council elections. However, electors in any single-member wards would only be able to vote once in district or borough council elections, and once in county council elections.
- 2.22 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 can vary dramatically each year.

Table 3: local elections in England 1996–2003

	Authorities	Wards	Seats	Eligible electors	Total local government electorate
1996	150	2,585	3,025	16,735,156	36,772,210
1997	56	2,716	3,293	20,117,795	37,002,115
1998	166	3,104	4,345	20,427,371	37,128,176
1999	308	6,900	10,810	29,472,663	37,227,699
2000	152	2,763	3,393	17,495,090*	37,301,107
2001	45	2,444	2,481	18,910,579	37,424,940
2002	174	3,342	5,914	22,046,708	37,629,125
2003	308	c. 6,800	c. 10,336	c. 31,500,000	37,531,611

Sources: LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth; Office for National Statistics
 Note: *In 2000, an additional 5,114,898 voters in London were able to vote in the first elections to the GLA

- 2.23 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 1996 and 2000, however, less than half of the total electorate were eligible to vote in metropolitan boroughs and those unitary or shire districts with elections by thirds. While there were no borough elections in London in 2000, more than 5 million electors were able to vote in elections to the GLA.

Combination of local and other elections

- 2.24 As noted above, electors in two-tier shire areas currently elect both district or borough council representatives and county council representatives. Elections to these two tiers of local government are staggered – in shire districts which elect by thirds, county council elections are held in the fallow fourth year of the electoral cycle; in areas which hold whole council elections the county elections are held in the second year following the district election. Similarly, in London where electors may vote for borough council

and GLA representatives, elections to the GLA are held in the second year following the borough elections.

- 2.25 In addition to the range of local authority elections in England, less frequent elections are also held for the Westminster parliament and the European parliament. In certain circumstances, these elections may be held at the same time as local government elections in England. Elections to the European Parliament are held once every five years (1999, 2004, 2009 etc.) on a date agreed by European Union member states, generally in the first or second week of June. Normally, then, these elections will take place about a month after any local elections, which are held in May.
- 2.26 The Government has recently consulted on the possibility of moving the date of the local elections (including elections to the GLA) which are scheduled for 6 May 2004, in order to combine them with elections to the European Parliament on 10 June 2004. Moving the date of local elections would require primary legislation, and at the time of writing the Government is seeking a power in the Local Government Bill which would allow for such a change by means of a statutory instrument. Elections to the European Parliament take place once every five years, and the next elections after 2004 are scheduled to take place in June 2009, in the same year that the normal elections to county councils will be held.
- 2.27 General elections to the Westminster parliament are not required to be held on a specified frequency, but must take place within five years from the day of the previous election. A general election may be held at any point during the year, and may be held on the same day as local elections. However, since 1945, on only three occasions has a general election been held on the same day as local elections (including the county council elections of 2001 which were postponed to June 7, when a general election was also held). Other general elections since 1945 have been held in the months of February, March, April, June, July and October.

Questions for consultation

- 2.28 The Electoral Commission has been asked to identify options for change to the local government electoral cycle which would simplify the current cycle. It is clear that any such options might involve varying degrees of simplification, from an approach which seeks minimal change to more comprehensive reform of the local government electoral cycle. We seek guidance from respondents on the principles which should guide the next stages of our review, and the broad direction and structure of our recommendations.
- 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?*

- 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?*

3 Evidence

- 3.1 In undertaking this review, we recognise that many views on the issues involved may be based on the experience of respondents gained through years of involvement in local government. While such practical knowledge and experience is extremely valuable, the Commission also notes the importance of the use of objective evidence where it is available. We have commissioned two studies on issues of particular relevance to this review, which we hope will be of value to respondents in considering the range of issues involved in this review. Firstly, we asked MORI to undertake a study of public awareness of local government elections, and attitudes towards change. Secondly, the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, has undertaken a statistical analysis of the relationship between local government electoral cycles and turnout.
- 3.2 We have summarised the key findings of these studies below, together with our own consideration of some evidence from the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework. The full text of the reports from MORI and the University of Plymouth is available to download from our website,⁶ or in hard copy on request from the Commission.

Public perceptions

- 3.3 In undertaking this review, The Electoral Commission is well aware of the importance of taking into account the views of electors, including both voters and non-voters. In particular, we are interested to understand how electors view current arrangements for local government elections, and what their attitudes are towards possible future changes to the local government electoral cycle. We commissioned MORI to undertake a survey of public opinion in England, with questions placed on their face-to-face omnibus survey in England between 24 and 28 April 2003. The initial survey results provide a broad impression of perceptions of local government electoral arrangements. However, at the analysis stage, the answers given by respondents about their perceptions of the local government elections were compared with details of the actual electoral cycle and arrangements in their area, to give a measure of *actual* understanding and awareness.
- 3.4 Analysis of responses to the survey reveals a relatively high level of general awareness of local elections taking place in May 2003 – when asked whether they thought local elections were taking place in their area, more than three-quarters (77%) of respondents answered correctly, although 14% said they did not know. This level of awareness may reflect the relatively large proportion of councils holding elections in 2003, and respondents in those areas with elections were more than twice as likely to answer correctly (85%) compared with those in areas without elections (35% of respondents answered correctly, while a further 40% did not know). These levels of awareness are broadly consistent with the findings of a similar survey undertaken by MORI prior to the local government elections in 2002, when 76% of respondents in areas holding elections responded correctly.⁷ Broadly, older more middle-class respondents living in rural areas were

⁶ www.electoralcommission.org.uk

⁷ MORI/Green Issues Communications, April 2002.

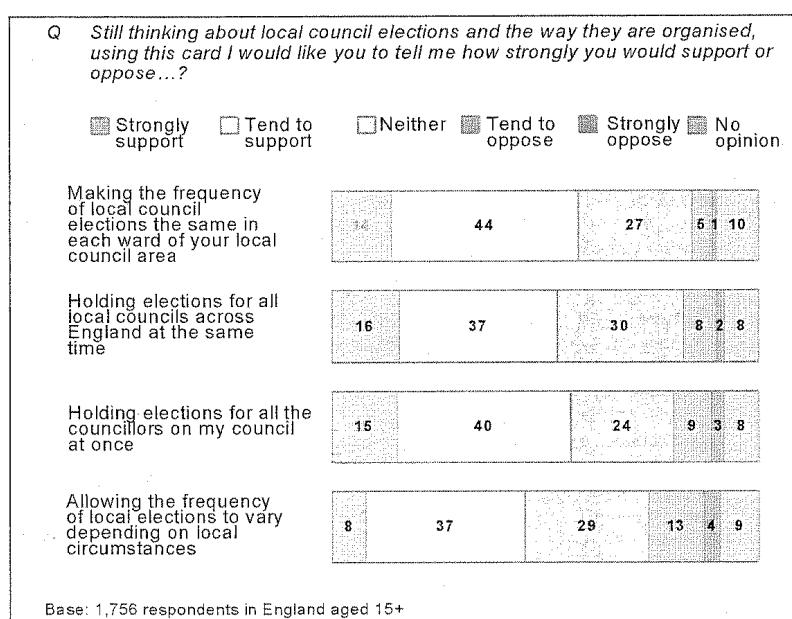
more likely to be aware of the elections in their area, while those living in London (where there were no elections in 2003) had the lowest levels of awareness.

- 3.5 However, despite this relatively high level of awareness in 2003, respondents were confused about which councils the elections were for. Fewer than one in five (19%) of those who thought there were elections in May were able to actually name which council they were for, and this was broadly consistent for respondents across all authority types. Again, further analysis of the responses highlights the degree of confusion among the electorate. Some 15% of all respondents thought there were elections for county councils in May 2003, despite there being no such elections held in England. Moreover, in London and metropolitan borough areas which are not even covered by county councils, 13% and 12% of respondents respectively believed there were county elections in 2003.
- 3.6 In those areas where elections were held in 2003, there were more varied levels of awareness of which council the elections were for. In shire districts, for example, fewer than 1% of respondents incorrectly identified 'London' or 'metropolitan borough', while just under half (47%) of respondents correctly identified their authority type. In metropolitan borough areas, one in four respondents (26%) correctly identified their authority type, and a further 21% responded 'city' or 'borough' council, the most common names for metropolitan borough councils. However, while a total of 60% of respondents in unitary authorities named 'district', 'city' or 'borough' council elections, 21% mistakenly thought there were county elections in 2003. MORI note that these findings are very much in line with previous research in this area, which has revealed hazy awareness among the electorate of the identities and responsibilities of local authorities and the various tiers of local government in England.
- 3.7 There is further confusion and 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 they did not know how often elections were held in their area, and only 16% were able to correctly identify the actual cycle of local elections. This was broadly consistent across all local authority types except metropolitan boroughs, where only 5% of respondents gave a correct answer. When other responses were compared with the actual frequency of elections at a ward level, it appears that the current varied pattern of electoral cycle across England may have an effect on levels of awareness and understanding. Respondents in wards where elections were held either annually or only once every four years were almost equally 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 more likely to think that elections are held every year (37%). Similarly, respondents in areas with elections in two out of four years were actually more likely to think that elections were held only once every four years (27% compared with 19%).
- 3.8 However, despite this confusion, there does appear to be some broad satisfaction with the current frequency of local elections. Some 71% of respondents feel that the frequency in their area is 'about right', and their responses were broadly consistent regardless of the actual frequency (between 69%–71%). A small number (5%) felt elections were held too frequently, while 6% thought they were held too often. Nearly one in 5

(19%), however, did not express a view on this issue. When asked for their views on the current term of office for local councillors, just over two thirds of respondents (64%) felt that four years was 'about right', although 23% felt they are too long. Those living in unitary or metropolitan authorities were slightly more likely to feel that current terms were 'too long' (28%) than those living in shire district areas which area also covered by county councils.

3.9 Respondents were also asked to state how strongly they would support or oppose a number of propositions for changes to the cycle of local elections. The results, as illustrated in Figure 1, appear to suggest that the public would be broadly in favour of some moves which might simplify the local electoral cycle. However, MORI also note that the relatively large proportion of respondents who said they neither supported nor opposed the various measures or who said they had no opinion (over a third in all cases), may suggest that this is not a subject that the general public have given much thought to in the past or on which many people hold strong views.

Figure 1: Changes to electoral cycles



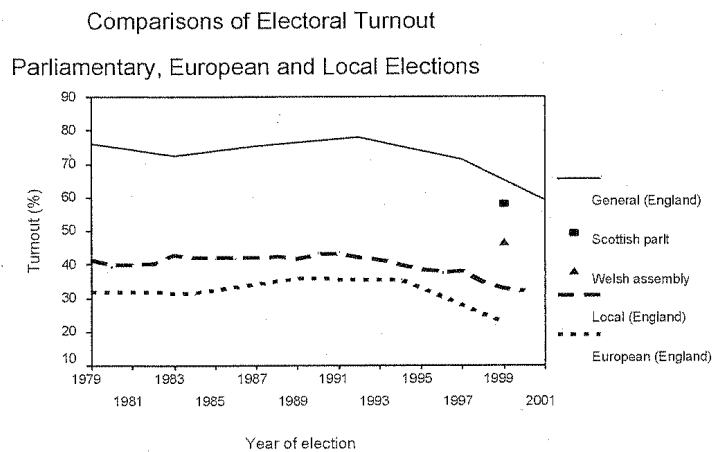
3.10 There do not appear to be any particularly consistent patterns among respondents in different areas of England. Support for the suggestion that elections might be held for all councillors on their council at once was just as likely to be supported by respondents in areas that currently hold elections by thirds as by those that have whole council elections (both 56%). However, net support by respondents for the suggestion that elections for all councils across Britain might be held at the same time was considerably higher in Metropolitan areas (+54%) and London Boroughs (+51%) than in districts (+37%), and somewhat higher in areas with thirds elections

compared to whole council (+49% compared with +37%). Despite this broad support for suggested moves to make the electoral cycle more consistent, however, there is also some support for a degree of flexibility in frequency, with 45% of respondents agreeing that the frequency of local elections across England should be allowed to vary depending on local circumstances.

Participation

3.11 Declining levels of participation, in particular low turnout at local elections, raise concerns about local democracy and accountability. We are especially keen to understand what effect structural issues, such as the local government electoral cycle, can have on turnout, particularly if they might inhibit levels of participation. The Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, has undertaken a statistical analysis of the relationship, if any, between local government electoral cycles and turnout at local elections during the last 30 years. 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. The research also examined levels of turnout at county council elections, under which authorities at the shire district level have differing electoral cycles, in order to establish whether the frequency with which electors are invited to vote might influence overall levels of turnout.

Figure 2: Trends in electoral turnout in England, 1979–2001



3.12 It is clear that local elections in England have not proved immune to the general decline in electoral turnout that has been witnessed in the United Kingdom in recent years. The Elections Centre note that the decline in turnout in the UK at a parliamentary level has been at the upper level of a global trend and that the trend in local government elections is similar, although it remains roughly half that for general elections. Local turnout

remained fairly stable until the 1990s, at around 40%, but then began a decline which accelerated in the middle of that decade.

- 3.13 The Elections Centre's analysis concentrated mainly upon differences between London and metropolitan boroughs, and in shire districts, approximately two thirds of which hold whole council elections while the remainder elect by thirds.⁸ They note that real differences in turnout do in fact exist. Over the last 30 years, the four-yearly elected London boroughs generally have had a higher electoral turnout than the metropolitan boroughs, which elect by thirds. In all years, with the single exception of 2002, when both types of authority have held elections, the turnout in London has been between 2–10 percentage points higher than in the metropolitan authorities. Moreover, the London boroughs appear to have resisted the tendency of very low turnouts of below 30% that have afflicted the metropolitan councils in recent years.
- 3.14 Similar differences were measured between the two types of shire district. With only one exception (in 1979, when local and general elections coincided) the turnout in shire districts with elections by thirds has been lower in those years when both types of district hold elections. However, the magnitude of those differences is smaller than those noted in London and the metropolitan boroughs, ranging between one to three percentage points.
- 3.15 However, it would be crude to conclude that these differences in turnout are wholly a function of the different electoral cycles used by these authorities. Indeed, previous work has suggested that a number of other political and structural variables may play a part in helping to determine levels of electoral engagement.⁹ Some electoral innovations, including all-postal pilot schemes in England in recent years, appear to have generated significant increases in turnout which have been sustained over several elections.
- 3.16 Healthy local political competition, for example, can help to enhance electoral turnout. The ratio of candidates to seats across the London and metropolitan boroughs during recent years has been broadly the same, and although competition in the shires is generally lower, there is greater competition in authorities that elect by thirds. Three-party competition has traditionally been greatest in the capital, although differences with the metropolitan boroughs are less noticeable when considering the number of seats at stake and not wards. However, party competition in shire districts is greater by a factor of almost two in those districts that elect by thirds. The strength of party control can also influence the probability that control will change as the result of an election. In areas which hold partial elections it might be practically impossible to change control of the council, regardless of the strength of the electorate's distaste for the ruling administration.
- 3.17 Using multivariate (multiple regression) analysis which incorporated a number of social, economic, structural and political variables, the Elections Centre sought to understand how the key determinants of participation affect overall levels of turnout. While the same sorts of influence appeared to be at

⁸ The research did not consider the recent change of electoral cycle in six shire districts to elections by halves.

⁹ Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth (2000) *Turnout in Local Elections: Influences on levels of voter registration and electoral participation*, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

work across the range of authorities, turnout remains lower in authorities that elect by thirds than for authorities that hold whole council elections. Using regression equations which were constructed for different authority types (London and metropolitan boroughs, shire districts electing by whole council and by thirds), the research assessed the theoretical effect of applying the alternative electoral cycle to the authorities included in the study. The results suggested that turnout would have declined in authorities that normally have whole council elections if they had held elections by thirds instead. By contrast, turnout would have risen slightly if authorities that normally have elections by thirds held whole council elections instead.

- 3.18 Finally, in order to consider the possible effect of voting frequency on turnout, the research examined levels of participation at English county council elections, which are held once every four years. The 34 county councils each contain shire districts which may hold either whole council elections or elections by thirds. While elections are all held on the same day, proximity to the most recent previous election will vary from district to district: in some areas the county election will be the first for two years, while in other areas elections will have been held in each of the preceding three years. A regression of turnout upon electoral frequency suggests that electors who are asked to vote more frequently are actually less likely to participate. Indeed, for every unit increase in election frequency (number of elections in a four-year cycle) turnout is predicted to decrease by just over two percentage points.

Performance

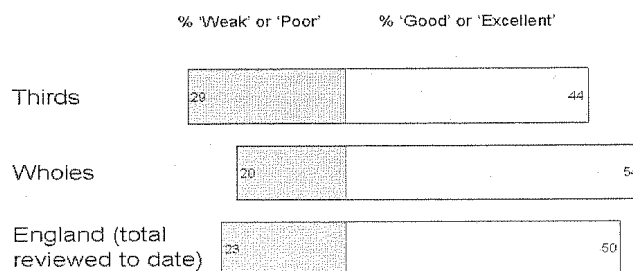
- 3.19 In considering options for change to the current cycle of local government elections in England, the Commission has been asked to have regard to the extent to which any changes may help to facilitate the effective management of local authorities. In particular, the Deputy Prime Minister's request invites us to examine the potential for improvements in the case of local authorities currently categorised as 'poor performers' in the Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA).
- 3.20 The CPA framework was established for English local authorities in December 2001, following the publication of the white paper *Strong Local Government – Quality Public Services*. The Audit Commission is responsible for undertaking CPA assessments, which aim to form a judgement on the performance and proven corporate capacity of every council in England. To date, the Audit Commission has published the results of 149 authority inspections, including inspections of county councils, London and metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities.
- 3.21 It is not clear that there is a direct relationship between the electoral cycle of a local authority and the 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.
- 3.22 In a small number of inspection reports which have been published to date, the Audit Commission has pointed to issues relating to the cycle of local government elections for authorities categorised as 'poor' performers. For

example, in the London borough of Lambeth, which holds whole council elections every four years, the Audit Commission's CPA report noted that:

The council generally experiences a high turnover of members at each election. This affects not only the council's stability, but also members' capacity to deal with a complex organisation that typically takes them two years to get to know.

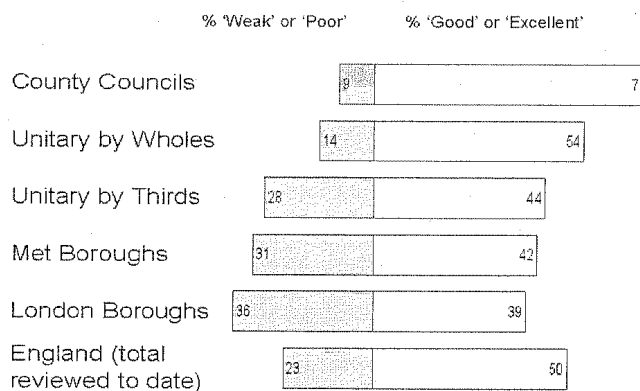
- 3.23 In Swindon, a unitary council which elects by thirds, the CPA report notes that 'new democratic arrangements were introduced in 2000 simultaneously with a significant (about 1/3) change in the composition of the council', and the Audit Commission notes the subsequent 'difficulties of obtaining political consensus for an agreed way forward'.
- 3.24 An initial examination of the Audit Commission's CPA categories by local authority type and electoral cycle does not suggest a significant relationship. Of the 149 authorities inspected by the Audit Commission to date 94 hold whole council elections, while the remaining 55 elect by thirds. Those authorities which hold whole council elections every four years were slightly more likely to be rated as either 'excellent' or 'good' (54%) than those electing by thirds (44%), and less likely to be rated either 'weak' or 'poor' (20% and 29% respectively).

Figure 3: Percentage of authorities receiving 'Weak' or 'Poor' and 'Excellent' or 'Good' CPA rating, by electoral cycle



- 3.25 However, considering CPA assessments by authority type presents a mixed picture which may tend to illustrate the importance of other factors, rather than the cycle of elections. While county councils were most likely to be rated 'good' or 'excellent' and least likely to receive a 'weak' or 'poor' rating, London boroughs were least likely to receive a 'good' or 'excellent' rating and most likely to be rated 'weak' or 'poor'. It may be instructive to note that, while the best performing authority types (county councils and whole council unitaries) both currently hold whole council elections, they share this electoral cycle with London boroughs, which tended to perform less well.

Figure 4: Percentage of each local authority type receiving 'Weak' or 'Poor' and 'Excellent' or 'Good' CPA rating



3.26 It appears that different local authority types share the capacity to deliver services well, regardless of the cycle of elections, and equally that authorities which share the same electoral cycle may be awarded different ratings, across the range of CPA assessment categories. A wide range of factors are considered by the Audit Commission in its CPA work, and it is important to recognise that issues other than the electoral cycle of an authority may be of greater relevance. In particular, we recognise that while an authority's electoral cycle is unlikely to be the sole cause of any problems or successes, it may tend to exaggerate other issues.

3.27 We outline the arguments which surround many of these issues in the following chapter, 'The case for and against partial or whole council elections', but recognise that our work will benefit from the experience of those who have recently been involved in a CPA assessment. We would particularly welcome comments from those who have had experience of the CPA assessment framework, and their views on the role of the electoral cycle in facilitating the effective management of local authorities.

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.*

4 The case for and against partial or whole council elections

- 4.1 The range of arguments for and against either partial¹⁰ or whole council elections is extensive, and this debate has been rehearsed and refined on a number of occasions during recent years.¹¹ We outline the key arguments below. Naturally, many of these arguments are contradictory, and they may be applied to support either type of electoral cycle. In particular, they reflect the balance between the representative function of councillors and their role in the effective management of local authorities. However, we do not consider that these arguments are necessarily mutually exclusive.
- 4.2 In considering these arguments, we would note that exceptions to any particular case will always exist. In particular, many of the issues raised, and corrective action proposed, may be based on the experience of extreme circumstances. It is clear that authorities which elect members on either type of cycle can suffer from similar problems and achieve success in similar areas – there may be examples of both good and bad practice under either cycle.
- 4.3 Moreover, it is not clear that any of the issues outlined below can necessarily be attributed solely to the particular electoral cycle of an individual authority. We recognise that many other factors can contribute to the issues or problems outlined below, and that the effect of the electoral cycle itself may only be to exaggerate other issues.
- 4.4 Below we outline our assessment of the key arguments for and against either partial or whole council elections, for information and to assist this consultation exercise. The range of arguments below is by no means exhaustive, and we would welcome details of any further relevant considerations. However, we would hope that any submission of further argumentation should, wherever possible, be supported by objective evidence or examples of practical experience.

Participation

- 4.5 Those who argue in favour of staggered elections, elections by thirds or by halves for example, note that such arrangements hold the potential for more frequent opportunities for participation by electors. However, it has also been argued that more frequent elections can tend to dilute public interest in elections. Electors may tire of being asked to pass judgment on their representatives annually. They may also feel that the impact of their individual vote is diminished by the relative difficulty of changing overall control of the council in areas where only one third of the seats are re-elected each year.

¹⁰ By 'partial' elections, we refer to elections by thirds and, where applicable, elections by halves.

¹¹ The majority of the issues raised in this chapter have previously been discussed in the 1986 report of the *Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business* (the Widdecombe Committee), the 1995 LGCE *Periodic Electoral Review Consultation Paper* and, most recently, in the 1998 government white paper *Local Democracy and Community Leadership*.

- 4.6 For local political parties and groups, it may be cheaper to contest whole council elections only once every four years, rather than organising campaigns on a more frequent annual basis. That said, it may be more difficult for parties to identify the larger number of candidates needed to contest all the seats up for election in areas which hold whole council elections, rather than fielding candidates in a smaller number of wards each year.

Democratic legitimacy

- 4.7 One of the keys to ensuring that local government authorities retain democratic legitimacy lies in maintaining a high degree of participation in the electoral process. As we have discussed above, whole council or partial elections can raise a range of issues relating to levels of participation. However, proponents of a system of elections by thirds have also argued that more frequent partial elections can ensure that the political composition of authorities more accurately reflects the current political complexion of the area, mirroring medium-term shifts in the views of electors. Moreover, it is argued, the overall control of the authority is less likely to be influenced by unique factors which are not necessarily typical of the long-term political nature of the local area.
- 4.8 On the other hand, in areas where elections of the whole council are held, all electors are given the opportunity to influence the political composition and control of the authority at the same time. In authorities which elect by thirds, only those electors in three-member wards will have the opportunity to vote annually. Electors in one- or two-member wards do not have the same opportunities to influence the overall composition of the authority.

Accountability

- 4.9 It has been argued that partial or staggered elections can provide for sharper and more immediate accountability. Councillors and local party groups are aware of the need to engage with the electorate and promote their policies or defend their record on an annual basis. Equally, electors themselves are given more frequent opportunities for democratic input and to cast their verdict on members and their policies.
- 4.10 However, the incremental pace of change in political control in local authorities which are partially elected can mean that it is often harder to change overall control of the council at any particular election. In this sense, the accountability of the authority as a corporate body may be said to be greater under a system of whole council elections than when partially elected. Moreover, when elections of the whole council are held at once, all electors have the opportunity to pass judgment on the performance of both their individual members and the authority as a whole, rather than sometimes different sections of the electorate voting each year.
- 4.11 Important but controversial decisions, on spending decisions or major planning issues for example, may need to be made at various times during the life of an authority. It has been suggested that such decisions may be postponed for political reasons until after an election. This may be more likely when an authority holds elections only once every four years, and would prevent electors holding the authority to account for another four

years. On the other hand, annual elections may encourage members and party groupings to conduct continuous election campaigns, to the detriment of normal council business.

Management

- 4.12 The cycle or frequency of elections may also have some impact on the capacity of a local authority to effectively manage and deliver their responsibilities. Partial elections may help to provide a degree of political continuity and stability by slowing the pace of change in council members over the four-year electoral cycle. Certainly, where whole council elections are held, it is possible that significant numbers of the new council members may be newly elected, with little or no previous experience. However, it might also be argued that more frequent elections discourage forward planning, with the attention of political groups focused more on annual elections than on council business. Moreover, where political control is closely balanced, frequent changes in the overall control of the authority can lead to inconsistencies in policy. Longer intervals between elections may help to encourage a more coherent long-term approach to policy development and decision making.
- 4.13 The absence of clear overall control of a council raises particular issues for the management of the authority, and different management approaches may be required for both officers and members. Regardless of any particular benefits or disadvantages of such a situation, it is clear that partial elections offer earlier and more frequent opportunities to clarify the overall political control of authorities. However, the relatively small proportion of seats that can practically change hands at each election may limit the actual scope for resolution of political control issues.
- 4.14 The costs to local authorities of running whole council elections once every four years may be less than those incurred holding elections by thirds, both in relation to the direct running costs of an election and indirectly in terms of the annual disruption to normal council business. Greater continuity in political composition, particularly in relation to the membership of committees, may help to encourage more productive working relationships between members and officers.

Electoral arrangements

- 4.15 With the exception of metropolitan boroughs, which all have three-member wards, there is a broad mixture of single- and multi-member wards in English local authorities at present. These wards reflect a wide range of geographic and community identity factors, although the primary consideration in determining electoral arrangements is electoral equality, ensuring that each councillor represents roughly the same number of electors.
- 4.16 In areas which hold partial elections, a mixed pattern of members per ward can mean that electors within the authority will have different opportunities to vote. However, a uniform pattern of wards which provides all electors with the same opportunity to vote, as in metropolitan boroughs for example, can limit the flexibility needed to best reflect both electoral equality and other factors such as community identity. In short, there may be a difficult balance

to be struck between providing equitable opportunities for participation in the democratic process, and ensuring that local electoral arrangements reflect local preferences. Moreover, multi-member wards will frequently cover larger geographical areas, particularly in rural areas, which can weaken the link between electors and representatives.

- 4.17 In areas where whole council elections are held, however, all seats are elected at the same time. There is consequently no need for a uniform pattern of wards, and greater flexibility to ensure that electoral arrangements reflect both local community identities and ensure electoral equality.

Questions for consultation

- 4.18 In the next stage of this review, the Commission will be considering a range of options for change to the current cycle of local government elections, before submitting our final report to the Secretary of State. In considering those options, we will assess them against a range of criteria, and through consultation on the issues and questions raised in this paper, we aim to identify the most appropriate and important criteria to be used. We would welcome respondents' views on the matters outlined in this section, particularly where personal experience might aid our understanding of the issues.

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?*

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,¹² 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 arrangements¹³ 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 12 months after the date of the Secretary of State's request.

Signed for and on behalf of the Secretary of State
28 January 2003

¹² "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.

¹³ 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: Background to the current local government electoral cycle in England

Historical context

Prior to the reorganisation of English local government which took place in the early 1970s, county councils held whole council elections every three years, and borough councils held elections by thirds. Most district councils also held elections by thirds, although provisions under the Local Government Act 1933, which set out the electoral arrangements for local government in England, also allowed whole council elections for districts where desired.

In London, the metropolitan borough councils and county councils which once covered the London area held whole council elections every three years. The Local Government Act 1963 established a new Greater London Council (GLC) in place of the county councils and, under the new arrangements which followed the 1963 Act, the London boroughs held whole council elections at same time as other boroughs in England, while the GLC held whole council elections at the same time as counties. The terms of office for councillors in London were extended from three to four years in 1976, and elections were thereafter held every four years. The GLC was abolished in 1986, but in 2000 the Greater London Authority (GLA) re-established city-wide government in the capital. Elections to the GLA are held once every four years.

Outside London, the Local Government Act 1972 established six metropolitan county councils in place of the county boroughs, together with 36 metropolitan district or borough councils below them. The number of county councils was reduced to 39, and the remaining non-county borough, urban and rural district councils were replaced by a total of 296 district or borough councils.

The new metropolitan borough councils held elections by thirds, and were also required to have wards divisible by three. The counties, including the metropolitan county councils, continued to hold whole council elections, but moved to a four-year term of office for members. The non-metropolitan boroughs or districts could hold either whole council elections or elections by thirds and all councillors served for a term of office of four years. The metropolitan counties were abolished in 1985, leaving a single tier of local government in metropolitan areas.

Following the Local Government Act 1992, the structure of local government in England was reviewed by the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE), and the subsequent reorganisation saw a number of existing councils replaced by single-tier unitary authorities. As part of this review process, the LGCE could recommend that these new authorities hold either whole council elections every four years or elections by thirds.

Previous reviews and recent government policy

Redcliffe-Maud Commission

Formally known as the 'Royal Commission on Local Government in England', the Redcliffe-Maud Commission was established by the Labour Government of 1966 to review the structure, workings and functions of local government in England. Published in 1969, the report of the Commission proposed a largely unitary system of

local government, with some two-tier areas in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. The Commission noted arguments for extending the term of office for councillors from three to four years, but did not make a formal recommendation for change. It did, however, recommend that all authorities should hold whole council elections, and that elections in two-tier areas should be staggered. The recommendations of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission were largely left unimplemented by the incoming Conservative government of 1970 (save for the proposal for two-tier arrangements in metropolitan areas), which considered that local government structures would remain confusing, unaccountable and remote under the reforms.

Widdicombe Report

The 1986 *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business*, more commonly known as the Widdicombe Report, also included consideration of local government electoral arrangements. The Committee was established in response to perceived improprieties in local government, in particular increasing politicisation of local government officers. The Committee's report identified what it saw as a 'need for a simple uniform system' for local government elections, and proposed a uniform pattern of single-member wards or divisions across the country, together with whole council elections every four years. These recommendations were largely rejected by the Government, which did not agree that changes should be made to the electoral arrangements for councils. In particular, in its response to the Committee's report the Government noted that variations in the local government electoral cycle were the result of strongly expressed local feelings.

LGCE consultation paper 1995

Prior to commencing its programme of Period Electoral Reviews (PERs) of local authority electoral arrangements in the mid 1990s, the Local Government Commission for England undertook a consultation exercise to inform the development of the general principles and policies it would adopt in its review process. The LGCE consultation paper sought views on a number of issues relating to the future electoral arrangements of local authorities. While it recognised the merits of whole council elections for areas with a mixed pattern of single- and multi-member wards, the paper noted that the Commission did not intend to override local preferences.

In March 1996 the LGCE published its *Guidance and procedural advice for local authorities and other interested parties*. This guidance confirmed the Commission's approach, in relation to electoral cycles: 'in light of the responses received, and within the constraints of the legislation, it will not be the Commissions' intention to override local preferences or practices'.

Recent government policy

One of the commitments included in the Labour party's 1997 general election manifesto was: 'To ensure greater accountability, a proportion of councillors in each locality will be elected annually'. The 1998 Green Paper *Local Democracy and Community Leadership* clarified that:

This does not mean that any councillor should face an election each year, but that electors within an authority should have an opportunity to vote for members of the authority each year. This would give communities a more frequent democratic input to, and judgement on, the decisions being taken by the authorities that serve them.

The Green Paper considered a number of possible amendments to local electoral arrangements in England which would facilitate the move towards annual elections, including the introduction of four-member wards and the shortening of councillors' terms of office to three years. It also noted the implications of moving towards annual elections, and set out a range of options for how the Government could give effect to its proposals.

The 1998 White Paper *Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People* reiterated the government's commitment to annual accountability in local government. Under proposals outlined in the White Paper, all unitary and single-tier authorities would be elected by thirds, with the 'fallow' year used for other elections such as those for directly elected mayors and for the mayor and assembly of the Greater London Authority. In two-tier areas it was suggested that district or borough and county councils would each elect by halves in alternate years, thereby allowing electors in these areas to vote every year.

In its 2001 White Paper *Strong Local Leadership - Quality Public Services* the Government noted that: 'The current cycle of local government elections is confusing', and proposed inviting The Electoral Commission to review the cycle of local government elections and identify options for change to the current cycle. This consultation paper is the first stage of that review.

International practice

Below a number of examples of international practice are considered as an introduction to alternative systems for the election of local government representatives. These examples are not exhaustive, and are only intended to provide a brief overview of practice in other countries.

United Kingdom

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland currently have unitary systems of local government, with only a single tier of authorities. Local council representatives serve for a term of office of four years and whole council elections are held every four years.

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales were held in 1999, and coincided with local elections in Scotland and Wales. Local elections in Scotland were held on the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 2003, and they will continue to be combined in future. However, prompted by concerns about confusion and low participation, the local government elections due to be held in Wales in 2003 were deferred until May 2004 to ensure that they did not coincide with elections to the National Assembly. Following the elections in 2004, local elections in Wales will continue on a four-year cycle thereafter.

The last local elections in Northern Ireland were held in June 2001, and coincided with the UK parliamentary general election of the same year. Normally, local elections in Northern Ireland are held in the second week of May, and are not combined with elections to any other bodies. The first elections to the Northern

Ireland Assembly took place in June 1998, with subsequent elections due in May 2003 and every four years thereafter.¹⁴

Europe

In other European countries, local government responsibilities may be shared between up to three different tiers of authorities. The Netherlands has only one tier, comprising 496 municipalities, whereas Denmark has two tiers which comprise 14 county authorities and 275 local authorities. In France local government is on one level (that of the municipality), and Germany also has only one tier. However, in Ireland local government covers two tiers, comprising 29 county councils, five city council, five borough councils and 75 town councils.

The length of the local government electoral cycle also varies in other parts of Europe. In the Netherlands all municipal elections take place once every four years, as is also the case in Denmark. In France municipal governments hold whole council elections every six years, whereas in Germany terms of office for local government range between four and six years. Irish local authorities hold whole council elections once every five years.

In some European countries, local government elections may also coincide with elections to national representatives bodies. The next local elections in Denmark are due in 2005, as are the national elections which are also held every four years. In Germany, where terms of office vary in length, some local elections may coincide with national elections to the Bundestag, which are held every four years. However, local elections in the Netherlands always take place separately from national elections.

Other countries

Local government in Canada is on one tier, while in New Zealand it is on two and in Australia it is on three. In both Canada and New Zealand local authorities hold whole council elections every three years. In Australia local elections are also held by whole council every three years but are staggered, with each level of local government electing in consecutive years of the three-year cycle.

In Canada, local authorities in different areas elect in different years and therefore elections in some areas may coincide with four yearly parliamentary elections. A similar situation also exists in Australia where some local elections may coincide with federal elections held every three years. In New Zealand elections are staggered with national elections (also on a three year electoral cycle) and do not coincide.

Table A1 overleaf summarise the main aspects of local government electoral arrangements in other countries.

¹⁴ At the time of writing, elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly which were due to take place in May 2003 had been postponed until autumn 2003.

Table A1: Summary of local government electoral arrangements in other countries

	Tiers	Term	Cycle
UK:			
Wales	1	4	Whole
Scotland	1	4	Whole
Northern Ireland	1	4	Whole
Europe:			
Denmark	2	4	Whole
Finland	1	4	Whole
France	1	6	Whole
Germany	1	4-6	Whole
Ireland	2	5	Whole
Luxembourg	1	5	Whole
Netherlands	1	4	Whole
Portugal	1	3-4	Whole
Spain	2	4	Whole
Other countries:			
Australia	3	3	Whole
Canada	1	3	Whole
New Zealand	2	3	Whole

Appendix 3: Schedule of current local government electoral cycles in England

London boroughs

Elections to the 32 London boroughs take place once every four years (2002, 2006 etc.), although the Corporation of London elects all its members every year. All electors in London can also vote in elections to the GLA every four years (2000, 2004 etc.).

Metropolitan boroughs

The 36 Metropolitan boroughs hold elections in three years of a four-year electoral cycle, with one year fallow (2002, 2003, 2004, no election in 2005 etc.). One third of all seats (one seat per three-member ward) are elected each year.

Shire districts and county councils

Shire districts may hold elections on one of three cycles: whole council elections every four years (2003, 2007 etc.); elections by thirds (2002, 2003, 2004, no election in 2005 etc.); elections by halves (2002, 2004 etc.). All electors in shire areas can also vote in county council elections once every four years (2001, 2005 etc.).

Table A2 sets out the current electoral cycle of each shire district.

Table A2: Current electoral cycles

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Adur District Council	Thirds	Bedford Borough Council	Thirds
Allerdale District Council	Whole	Berwick-Upon-Tweed Borough Council	Whole
Alnwick District Council	Whole	Blaby District Council	Whole
Amber Valley District Council	Thirds	Blyth Valley Borough Council	Whole
Arun District Council	Whole	Bolsover District Council	Whole
Ashfield District Council	Whole	Boston Borough Council	Whole
Ashford Borough Council	Whole	Braintree District Council	Whole
Aylesbury Vale District Council	Whole	Breckland District Council	Whole
Babergh District Council	Whole	Brentwood Borough Council	Thirds
Barrow-In-Furness Borough Council	Thirds	Bridgnorth District Council	Whole
Basildon District Council	Thirds	Broadland District Council	Thirds
Basingstoke And Deane Borough Council	Thirds	Bromsgrove District Council	Whole
Bassetlaw District Council	Thirds	Broxbourne Borough Council	Thirds

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Broxton Borough Council	Whole	Dacorum District Council	Whole
Burnley Borough Council	Thirds	Dartford Borough Council	Whole
Cambridge City Council	Thirds	Daventry District Council	Thirds
Cannock Chase District Council	Thirds	Derbyshire Dales District Council	Whole
Canterbury City Council	Whole	Derwentside District Council	Whole
Caradon District Council	Whole	Dover District Council	Whole
Carlisle City Council	Thirds	Durham City Council	Whole
Carrick District Council	Whole	Easington District Council	Whole
Castle Morpeth Borough Council	Whole	East Cambridgeshire District Council	Whole
Castle Point Borough Council	Thirds (from 2003)	East Devon District Council	Whole
Charnwood Borough Council	Whole	East Dorset District Council	Whole
Chelmsford Borough Council	Whole	East Hampshire District Council	Whole
Cheltenham Borough Council	Halves (from 2002)	East Hertfordshire District Council	Whole
Cherwell District Council	Thirds	East Lindsey District Council	Whole
Chester City Council	Thirds	East Northamptonshire District Council	Whole
Chesterfield Borough Council	Whole	East Staffordshire Borough Council	Whole
Chester-Le-Street District Council	Whole	Eastbourne Borough Council	Thirds
Chichester District Council	Whole	Eastleigh Borough Council	Thirds
Chiltern District Council	Whole	Eden District Council	Whole
Chorley Borough Council	Thirds	Ellesmere Port & Neston Borough Council	Thirds
Christchurch Borough Council	Whole	Elmbridge Borough Council	Thirds
Colchester Borough Council	Thirds	Epping Forest District Council	Thirds
Congleton Borough Council	Thirds	Epsom And Ewell Borough Council	Whole
Copeland Borough Council	Whole	Erewash Borough Council	Whole
Corby Borough Council	Whole	Exeter City Council	Thirds
Cotswold District Council	Whole	Fareham District Council	Halves (from 2002)
Craven District Council	Thirds	Fenland District Council	Whole
Crawley Borough Council	Thirds	Forest Heath District Council	Whole
Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council	Thirds	Forest Of Dean District Council	Whole

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Fylde Borough Council	Whole	Macclesfield Borough Council	Thirds
Gedling Borough Council	Whole	Maidstone Borough Council	Thirds
Gloucester City Council	Thirds	Maldon District Council	Whole
Gosport Borough Council	Halves (from 2002)	Malvern Hills District Council	Whole
Gravesham Borough Council	Whole	Mansfield District Council	Whole
Great Yarmouth Borough Council	Thirds	Melton District Council	Whole
Guildford Borough Council	Whole	Mendip District Council	Whole
Hambleton District Council	Whole	Mid Bedfordshire District Council	Whole
Harborough District Council	Whole	Mid Devon District Council	Whole
Harlow District Council	Thirds	Mid Suffolk District Council	Whole
Harrogate Borough Council	Thirds	Mid Sussex District Council	Whole
Hart District Council	Thirds	Mole Valley District Council	Thirds
Hastings Borough Council	Halves (from 2002)	New Forest District Council	Whole
Havant Borough Council	Thirds	Newark & Sherwood District Council	Whole
Hertsmere District Council	Thirds	Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough Council	Thirds
High Peak District Council	Whole	North Cornwall District Council	Whole
Hinkley And Bosworth Borough Council	Whole	North Devon District Council	Whole
Horsham District Council	Whole	North Dorset District Council	Whole
Huntingdonshire District Council	Thirds	North East Derbyshire District Council	Whole
Hyndburn Borough Council	Thirds	North Hertfordshire District Council	Thirds
Ipswich Borough Council	Thirds	North Kesteven District Council	Whole
Kennet District Council	Whole	North Norfolk District Council	Whole
Kerrier District Council	Whole	North Shropshire District Council	Whole
Kettering Borough Council	Whole	North Warwickshire District Council	Whole
King's Lynn & West Norfolk	Whole	North West Leicestershire District Council	Whole
Lancaster City Council	Whole	North Wiltshire District Council	Whole
Lewes District Council	Whole	Northampton District Council	Whole
Lichfield District Council	Whole	Norwich City Council	Thirds
Lincoln City Council	Thirds	Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council	Halves (from 2002)

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Oadby & Wigston District Council	Whole	South Bucks District Council	Whole
Oswestry Borough Council	Whole	South Cambridgeshire District Council	Thirds
Oxford City Council	Halves (from 2002)	South Derbyshire District Council	Whole
Pendle Borough Council	Thirds	South Hams District Council	Whole
Penwith District Council	Thirds	South Holland District	Whole
Preston Borough Council	Thirds	South Kesteven District Council	Whole
Purbeck District Council	Thirds (from 1999)	South Lakeland House	Thirds
Redditch District Council	Thirds	South Norfolk District Council	Whole
Reigate & Banstead Borough Council	Thirds	South Northamptonshire District Council	Whole
Restormel Borough Council	Whole	South Oxfordshire District Council	Whole
Ribble Valley Borough Council	Whole	South Ribble Borough Council	Whole
Richmondshire District Council	Whole	South Shropshire District Council	Whole
Rochford District Council	Thirds	South Somerset District Council	Whole
Rossendale Borough Council	Thirds	South Staffordshire District Council	Whole
Rother District Council	Whole	Spelthorne Borough Council	Whole
Rugby Borough Council	Thirds	St Albans District Council	Thirds
Runnymede Borough Council	Thirds	St Edmundsbury Borough Council	Whole
Rushcliffe Borough Council	Whole	Stafford Borough Council	Whole
Rushmoor District Council	Thirds	Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	Whole
Ryedale District Council	Whole	Stevenage Borough Council	Thirds
Salisbury District Council	Whole	Stratford-On-Avon District Council	Thirds
Scarborough Borough Council	Whole	Stroud District Council	Thirds
Sedgefield District Council	Whole	Suffolk Coastal District Council	Whole
Sedgemoor District Council	Whole	Surrey Heath Borough Council	Whole
Selby District Council	Whole	Swale Borough Council	Thirds
Sevenoaks District Council	Whole	Tamworth Borough Council	Thirds
Shepway District Council	Whole	Tandridge District Council	Thirds
Shrewsbury And Atcham District Council	Thirds	Taunton Deane Borough Council	Whole
South Bedfordshire District Council	Thirds	Teesdale District Council	Whole

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Teignbridge District Council	Whole	Wear Valley District Council	Whole
Tending District Council	Whole	Wellingborough Borough Council	Whole
Test Valley Borough Council	Whole	Welwyn Hatfield District Council	Thirds
Tewkesbury Borough Council	Whole	West Devon Borough Council	Whole
Thanet District Council	Whole	West Dorset District Council	Whole
Three Rivers District Council	Thirds	West Lancashire District Council	Thirds
Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council	Whole	West Lindsey District Council	Thirds
Torridge District Council	Whole	West Oxfordshire District Council	Thirds
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	Thirds	West Somerset District Council	Whole
Tynedale District Council	Whole	West Wiltshire District Council	Whole
Uttlesford District Council	Whole	Weymouth And Portland Borough Council	Thirds
Vale Of White Horse District Council	Whole	Winchester City Council	Thirds
Vale Royal Borough Council	Whole	Woking Borough Council	Thirds
Wansbeck District Council	Whole	Worcester City Council	Thirds
Warwick District Council	Whole	Worthing District Council	Thirds
Watford Borough Council	Thirds	Wychavon District Council	Whole
Waveney District Council	Thirds	Wyre Borough Council	Whole
Waverley Borough Council	Whole	Wyre Forest District Council	Thirds
Wealden District Council	Whole		

Unitary authorities

Unitary authorities may hold elections on either of two cycles: whole council elections every four years (2003, 2007 etc.); elections by thirds (2002, 2003, 2004, no election in 2005 etc.).

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Bath & North East Somerset Council	Whole	Bristol City Council	Thirds*
Blackburn With Darwen Borough Council	Thirds	Darlington Borough Council	Whole
Blackpool Borough Council	Whole	Derby City Council	Thirds
Bournemouth District Council	Whole	East Riding Of Yorkshire Council	Whole
Bracknell Forest District Council	Whole	Halton Borough Council	Thirds
City of Brighton & Hove	Whole	Hartlepool Council	Thirds

Name	Cycle	Name	Cycle
Herefordshire Council	Whole	Redcar & Cleveland Council	Whole
Isle Of Wight Council	Whole**	Rutland District Council	Whole
Kingston Upon Hull City Council	Thirds	Slough Borough Council	Thirds
Leicester City Council	Whole	South Gloucestershire Council	Whole
Luton Borough Council	Whole	Southampton City Council	Thirds
Medway Council	Whole (from 1997)	Southend-On-Sea Borough Council	Thirds
Middlesbrough Council	Whole	Stockton-On-Tees Council	Whole
Milton Keynes Borough Council	Thirds	Stoke-On-Trent City Council	Thirds
North East Lincolnshire Council	Thirds (from 2003)	Swindon Borough Council	Thirds
North Lincolnshire Council	Whole	Telford & Wrekin District Council	Whole
North Somerset Council	Whole	Thurrock Borough Council	Thirds
Nottingham City Council	Whole	Torbay Borough Council	Whole
Peterborough City Council	Thirds	Warrington Borough Council	Thirds (from 1997)
Plymouth City Council	Thirds (from 2003)	West Berkshire District Council	Whole
Poole Borough Council	Whole	Windsor & Maidenhead	Whole
Portsmouth City Council	Thirds	Wokingham District Council	Thirds
Reading Borough Council	Thirds	York City Council	Whole

Notes

**Bristol will elect councillors in 2003, 2005, 2006 etc., with fallow years in 2004, 2007 etc.*

***The Isle of White will hold whole council elections in the same year as county councils, 2005, 2009 etc.*