
REPORT TO:	COUNCIL	AGENDA ITEM: 14
DATE OF MEETING:	2 ND OCTOBER 2008	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE	OPEN PARAGRAPH NO: N/A
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	NEIL BETTERIDGE (595895)	DOC:
SUBJECT:	CONSULTATION PAPER – WEEKEND VOTING	REF:
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	

1.0 Reason for Exempt

1.1 Not applicable.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 That any comments on the Consultation Paper be forwarded to the Ministry of Justice.

3.0 Purpose of Report

3.1 To consider a Consultation Paper inviting views on whether voting could be made more convenient by changing the timing of Election Day itself, and on whether there are other steps that should be taken alongside that to make it easier for people to cast their vote.

4.0 Detail

Summary

4.1 The Government wants to forge a new relationship between Government and the citizen. To mark the start of this process, *The Governance of Britain* Green Paper includes proposals aimed at enhancing the rights and responsibilities of citizens and sets out more clearly the values that underpin British citizenship. The proposals are not a finished blueprint, but instead a route map towards a new constitutional settlement. This consultation document represents another step on that journey.

4.2 One of the goals of the programme is to invigorate democracy and give citizens the means to participate in decision-making at every level. As part of this, the Government intends to explore the barriers that currently exist to voting and how these can be overcome. The Consultation Paper focuses on the physical barriers to voting on Election Day.

- 4.3 There is a perception that Thursday is not the most accessible day for voting, and that changing to weekend voting would improve access and opportunities for voting. In the Green Paper, the Government commits to consulting with local authorities and others on the merits of moving the voting day for general (and/or local) elections from Thursday to the weekend and on the best way to do this. It made clear that the consultation would take into account the needs of religious groups, to ensure that those with religious concerns about voting on a Saturday or Sunday would have an opportunity to vote in a way that is consistent with their belief.
- 4.4 One of the Government's strategic aims is that people should be able to exercise their right to vote with ease and without unnecessary barriers. Its objective is to ensure voting processes are accessible, convenient and easy to use without compromising security. To this end, the Government is also keen to hear views on the following forms of advance voting and whether these would be acceptable alternatives to election days being held on a Thursday or may usefully support election days at the weekend:-

- advance voting at polling stations; and
- the use of advance and remote voting over the internet/telephone.

The Government is keeping an open mind on this issue and is interested to hear the views of all those with an interest in the subject.

Introduction

- 4.5 The consultation is aimed at the voter in general and at those with a particular interest in the electoral process and the timing of elections, such as political parties, local authorities and electoral administrators in the UK. It is also aimed at religious groups and voluntary sector organisations. The Consultation Paper considers several questions but in particular looks at:-

- pertinent issues, including religious concerns;
- whether any such move of day would impact upon the security of elections;
- the relationship between absent voting (e.g. postal voting) and election day;
- to what extent other mechanisms for voting, for example "remote" voting through postal votes or over the internet/telephone, or voting in advance of polling day, would be acceptable alternatives to those for whom weekend voting would present difficulties for religious or other reasons;
- what people perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of remote e-voting;
- whether changing the election day to the weekend, and/or the other measures aimed at increasing the convenience of voting, would incentivise non-voters to vote; and
- whether any possible additional costs of weekend voting are outweighed by any potential benefits.

- 4.6 A move to voting at weekends may make running elections more expensive. National elections are centrally funded but local elections are funded from local authority budgets. Estimates of how much more local elections will cost to run at weekends vary because no accurate information is currently available from local authorities on how much it costs to run local elections. The estimates set out in an impact assessment are based on the cost of a General Election for which there is no accurate information and these suggest that the additional cost may range between £38million and £58million per national election depending on if an election day is held

on only either a Saturday or a Sunday, or both. It is expected that this consultation will provide the information required for a more accurate assessment of cost to be developed. No resources are currently set aside to support a move to weekend voting and the impact of any new burdens on local authorities would need to be funded appropriately.

Proposals

4.7 The Government is keen to engage the public and interested parties in examining the case for holding the following elections at the weekend:-

- UK Parliamentary elections;
- Local elections in England and Wales; and
- European Parliamentary elections.

4.8 Matters relating to UK Parliamentary General elections and local elections in England and Wales are the responsibility of the UK Parliament. Under current legislation, voting at all elections in the UK may not extend over more than one day.

4.9 Since 1945, every general election in the UK has taken place on a Thursday. Prior to 1945, general elections took place on a variety of days; the last UK general election to take place on a weekend was on Saturday 14 December 1918.

4.10 The cumulative effect of the provisions in the Local Government Act 1972, Greater London Authority Act 1999 and Section 37 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 provide that local elections are held on the first Thursday in May every four years (although elections may be held in different years depending on the type of authority).

4.11 The timing of European Parliamentary elections is fixed by unanimous agreement of all member states, and covers an agreed four-day period from Thursday to Sunday to accommodate practice across the European Union. This flexible approach across Europe allows the UK to vote on Thursday whilst other countries vote on other days, albeit in the same poll. The Secretary of State has the power under Section 4 of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 to specify the date of the poll by order. The Secretary of State could set the same date for the poll on a weekend under his current powers. However, the rules for the conduct of European Parliamentary elections would need to be amended to permit voting on weekends to take place.

4.12 In common with the United Kingdom, national elections are held on a working weekday in Canada, the US, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands. In contrast, the great majority of other European countries hold election days either at the weekend or on a public holiday. For those European countries with Election Day at the weekend, Sunday is the most favoured day. The following table shows election days in a number of other countries:-

Weekday		Weekend	
Monday	Canada	Saturday and Sunday	Switzerland
Tuesday	US and Denmark	Saturday	Australia and New Zealand
Wednesday	Netherlands	Sunday	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy,
Thursday	UK and Ireland		

- 4.13 It has been argued that moving polling day to a weekend would be more convenient for the population in general, and that this may result in an increased turnout. In particular, given that the majority of people work on weekdays, with many balancing family and childcare commitments with working either full or part-time, Thursday may not be a convenient day for voting. This may be particularly true for women who remain the principal childcare providers. In addition, trends in working patterns, including hours worked, shift work and long commutes to and from the work, all place additional pressures on voters and may hinder voting on a weekday. These and other factors have led to concerns that the electoral process does not fit with modern lifestyles because many people, in the course of their working day, spend little or any time in the locality of their polling station.
- 4.14 Conversely, it has been argued that moving election days to weekends could present different barriers associated with lifestyle factors. People often have less of a routine at weekends and may prefer to use their time for recreational activity or be away from home. There may also be specific issues for individuals with caring responsibilities who may not have support at the weekend.
- 4.15 One argument advanced for a move to weekend voting is the potential for a positive effect on turnout. There is some evidence to support this, but the picture is mixed. Countries holding elections on the Sunday generally experience up to 6% higher turnouts than countries that go to the polls on weekdays. However, in his book on voter turnout, Professor Mark N Franklin now notes that in a range of countries which have adopted weekend voting since 1948, turnout did not appear to increase as a consequence, and there is no reliable evidence that weekend voting is an effective cure for low turnout. It is not clear whether those countries where elections are held at the weekend owe their higher average turnouts to that factor; nor is it clear whether weekend voting has contributed to the culture of voting in particular countries. The Electoral Commission, in a report on voter engagement and young people, noted that the provision of weekend voting was one of the preferred options to address non-voting at elections.
- 4.16 As noted earlier, most continental European countries that hold elections at weekends do so on a Sunday. However, both Saturdays and Sundays are days of religious observance for people in the UK as they are across Europe. A change to some voting on either day may therefore raise issues for some people on the grounds of faith. One option that might be explored in order to accommodate such objections is holding polls on both Saturday and Sunday. During the House of Commons debate on the Representation of the People Bill on 30 November 1999 Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, stated that if weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements it would be necessary to ensure that it took place on both days in order to accommodate the needs of Jewish and Christian communities. There would be cost implications in spreading voting over more than one day.
- 4.17 A move to weekend voting is likely to present administrative and resource challenges to delivering services in a secure and cost-effective manner. It could, however, afford the opportunity for electoral administrators to make adjustments to services to compensate for any problems with logistics, staff allocation or the application of procedures. The Government is interested to receive the views of administrators and others on the resource issues relating to weekend voting. In particular, the

Government welcomes views on the degree to which there would be different issues for elections held either on a Saturday or a Sunday, or elections held over a full weekend.

4.18 Some of the potential resource issues for administrators and others might include:-

- The recruitment of polling staff, both at polling stations themselves and at the count, over the weekend when people often have outside leisure and social commitments or may not wish to work.
- People who work on polling day are often local authority staff drafted in to assist for the day. The potential gain from staff not losing a working day on a Thursday would need to be offset against the cost of employing them at the weekend – perhaps paying overtime or other bonuses in order to retain them for Election Day duties.
- There is also a question as to whether people would be willing to work long days and counts on a Saturday and/or Sunday. If polling were held over two days, there might be a case for considering shortening the current polling hours from the present 7am to 10pm.
- The Royal Mail currently sweeps its sorting depots for postal votes to ensure none are missed before the close of poll. If elections are held at weekends this will raise issues for the sweep.

4.19 The cost of a General election in the UK is approximately £90 million. If elections (General, Local and European) are moved to the weekend, this figure may increase. The Government will be conducting an impact assessment to gather further evidence on the resource and cost issues outlined in paragraphs 4.16 – 4.18 above.

4.20 Weekend voting would raise issues around the availability and accessibility of polling locations. Church halls are often used as polling stations and these may be less likely to be available at weekends, particularly on Sundays. Finding suitable alternative polling locations may be an issue for some authorities, particularly in rural areas. However, it may be more straightforward to use school premises at the weekend without causing disruption to the teaching timetable. There may be costs involved in having caretakers open up and supervise use of schools at the weekend but the impact on the school calendar would be minimal. Less frequent transport in rural areas at the weekend, particularly on Sundays, may impact on voters being able to get to a polling station.

4.21 Where voting takes place on more than one day, polling station locations and materials within them must be secured between the closing of the voting on one day and the opening of voting on the next. This may lead to extra costs as temporary structures may not be suitable for securing elections material overnight and therefore additional security measures may be needed.

4.22 At present, there is a bar on polls being published from the start of polling until after the polls have closed. Careful consideration will need to be given to the implications for exit polls and media reporting in the event that polling were spread over both days of the weekend, since exit poll results and political news reports appearing at the “halfway” point has the potential to influence the election result.

4.23 If weekend voting was to be introduced for some or all election days, then consideration will have to be given to which weekend is most appropriate. Currently, all elections with the exception of the UK and European Parliaments take place on the first Thursday in May. If weekend voting took place, say on the first weekend in May then in most years this would fall on a May Day bank holiday weekend. It may therefore be preferable to move the normal time for these elections to the second weekend in May, which would preserve the concept of local elections taking place at the earliest possible date in the month of May whilst avoiding public holidays. However, there may be other weekends which could be more appropriate. The Government welcomes views on this.

4.24 There are, however, other ways in which voting could potentially be made accessible to individuals who did not wish to attend a polling station or cast a vote on a particular day. The Representation of the People Act 2000 made provision for every elector in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) to apply to vote by post either at every election (whether Parliamentary or local), for an indeterminate period or at a particular election only. There is, therefore, already some facility for those who would prefer not to vote on a particular day to do so in advance of polling day through the exercise of a postal vote. Other potential methods for delivering this facility are remote voting over the internet/telephone and “advance” voting in person at a polling station. These methods might also have value as a means of making voting more convenient. They are explored in more detail below.

4.25 As part of the Government’s programme of piloting innovative voting methods, 20 local authorities have piloted advance voting in polling stations since 2000. Evidence from these pilots has indicated that the availability of advance voting does little to increase turnout. Take up was generally around 2-3% of the votes cast. However, the trials took place in a context where Election Day was on a weekday. Advance voting would carry resource implications as it would require the physical maintenance of a secure polling station for a period of time before the main polling day. The Government welcomes views on whether greater access to advanced voting should be made available alongside or in addition to weekend voting.

4.26 In the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper, the Government committed to investigating the potential benefits of remote electronic voting (using the internet and the telephone). Such remote voting could potentially take place either before or on polling day. Since 2000 the Government has worked with a number of local authorities to pilot innovations such as electronic voting over the internet. This has helped to test potential solutions to assist voters who cannot attend a polling station in person on Election Day. The Government welcomes views on whether remote electronic voting, either on or in advance of polling day, would be acceptable alternatives for those for whom weekend voting would present difficulties for religious or other reasons.

4.27 Some of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of voting in person are:-

Perceived advantages

- Voters are familiar with the process of voting in person at their local polling stations;
- It is a visible act of democratic participation;
- The secrecy of the ballot is evidently assured with voting taking place in a screened booth; and

- Voters place their ballot directly in the box and can be assured that their vote will be accounted for.

Perceived disadvantages

- The polling station may be some distance from where some people live and difficult to get to due to a number of reasons. These may include:-
 - Lack of transport to the polling station (particularly in rural areas) or lack of parking facilities;
 - Polling station buildings being not as readily accessible as all individuals require.
- Lifestyles have changed significantly in the last few decades with people now more likely to be absent from their home for a range of reasons, including work and holidays;
- Voters can only vote at a polling station in the district in which they reside;
- Work commitments including commuting times may mean that a voter is unable to get to the polling station;
- Family or caring responsibilities may mean that a voter is unable to get to the polling station; and
- Schools may have to close for the day to enable the facilities to be used for polling. This may have wider implications for parents/guardians who may have to take time off work to look after their children.

4.28 Although the Consultation Paper focuses on the physical barriers to voting, it is clear that there are a number of other reasons for declining voter turnout. These include changing patterns of political expression – for example, evidence points to a fall in identification with collective forms of political expression such as political parties and people feeling that they are not able to influence political decisions. The Government hopes to use the Citizens' Summit on the benefits of moving Election Day to explore how some of these issues influence people's decisions on whether to vote and the concept of voting as a civic duty.

4.29 The Government would welcome responses to the following questions arising from the Consultation Paper:-

1. Do you think that polling day should be:-

- a weekday
- a Saturday
- a Sunday, or
- take place over both Saturday and Sunday?

Please say why.

2. Who would be affected by changing the voting day to a weekend and how?

3. Do you think that greater access to advance voting in polling stations should be made available alongside weekend voting? Please explain why.

4. Do you think that greater access to remote voting (whether through traditional postal voting or by electronic means) should be made available alongside weekend voting? Should such arrangements be explored even if polling day were not moved to the weekend? Please explain why.

5. What do you perceive to be the benefits and the drawbacks of remote e-voting?

6. Should the Government pilot weekend voting before introducing it across the UK?

7. What other issues may arise if the polling day is moved to the weekend? What are the issues for:-

- resources?
- Polling station venues?
- Security?
- administration of the election?

8. If weekend voting is introduced for local government elections, do you agree that the normal time for holding these elections should be moved from the first Thursday in May to the second weekend in May?

If not, please explain which weekend you believe it would be most appropriate for these elections to be held and why.

9. Are you aware of any barriers which prevent individuals from voting? What are the issues and how can they be overcome?

Comments

4.30 The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) has raised several issues in response to the Consultation Paper. Local authorities will undoubtedly wish to submit their views on the resource implications for weekend voting. There are also some omissions from the consultation document which local authorities may also have views on and may wish to make mention of in their submissions. The consultation document does not, for example:-

- consider the use of count venues which may also have other uses at weekends.
- recognise that some districts may have significant numbers of residents who are likely to go away for weekends.
- make mention of parish councils that also have elections on the ordinary day of election. Local authorities may also wish to express their views relating to parish council elections.
- mention that the UK's systems for postal ballots has been severely criticised by a number of observers (including the Council of Europe which acts as international election observers) for allowing the possibility of fraud to take place.
- mention that older people and those who voted in the last General election have a preference for retaining the tradition of voting on Thursdays.
- consider that counting combined elections for weekend voting would involve elections staff working significantly more days, the stress and excessive working hours would be difficult to manage and the practicalities would mean that the results would take longer to deliver.

Convention dictates that since 1935, General elections have been held on Thursdays. For local elections, this is now covered by statute. The government already has the power to vary the date of local elections for principal authorities by order and the Department for Communities and Local Government has recently consulted on moving the date of the May local elections in 2009 to June 2009 to coincide with the European Parliamentary elections. In light of the previous and proposed combination of these elections, the Government is also now considering whether to hold European Parliamentary elections on the weekend which had not been muted in the earlier *Governance of Britain* Green Paper. Holding European Parliamentary elections on the weekend would, however, require primary legislation.

It would be undoubtedly worrying to local government if its elections were to be regularly downplayed by being held in combination with other electoral campaigns.

5.0 Corporate Implications

5.1 The Government wishes to encourage greater voter participation and engagement. The act of voting is at the heart of the democratic process and a key part of democracy is looking at how to identify and remove barriers to the exercise of that right. The Government is inviting views on whether voting could be made more convenient by changing the timing of Election Day itself and on whether there are other steps that should be taken alongside this – for example, greater use of advance or remote electronic voting.

6.0 Community Implications

6.1 The Government's objectives behind exploring the benefits of changing the timing of Election Day are to:-

- Make the voting process universally accessible for all eligible people, reflecting the needs of a diverse and mobile society;
- Ensure that the voting process is convenient and responsive to the needs of people by providing multiple channels to vote, providing choices on how to participate in the voting process.

The intended outcome is to encourage greater participation and ownership of the electoral process.

7.0 Background Papers

7.1 24 June 08 Consultation Paper