

CONSULTATION PAPER – WEEKEND VOTING**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has issued a consultation paper on the merits of moving the day of elections from Thursday to the weekend, and on the best way of dealing with this. An extract is attached as Appendix 1 to this report. It may be viewed in its entirety at justice.gov.uk/docs/cp1308.pdf. The closing date for responses is 26 September 2008.
- 1.2 The consultation has been issued as part of the Government's programme to invigorate democracy and give citizens the means to participate in decision-making at every level.

2. ISSUES RAISED

- 2.1 The consultation paper looks at –
- Religious concerns
 - Whether moving the day would impact on the security of elections
 - The relationship between absent 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.
- 2.2 The particular questions on which the Government is seeking responses are set out in Appendix 2. Suggested responses have been included as the basis for discussion. These have been prepared by the officers, and represent views largely from the point of view of the practical implications of administering an election. Members of the Committee might well have different perspectives on some of these issues and members' input and comments would be welcome.

- 2.3 Additional costs of a move to weekend voting are estimated at between £38 and £58 million per national election, depending on whether elections are held on either a Saturday or Sunday or both. The additional costs of local elections have not been estimated as the total overall spend on local elections is not available to the MoJ at this stage. The consultation paper states that no resources are currently set aside for this purposes and “the impact of any new burdens on local authorities would need to be funded appropriately”.

3. GENERAL VIEWS

- 3.1 In summary, the officers' views are that a move to weekend voting would not make a substantial difference to turnout and that the ongoing costs involved are difficult to justify. A number of the ideas put forward in the consultation paper, for example early voting, remote voting, etc, could equally be applied to the current arrangements for voting on a Thursday to make voting easier for those who find it difficult to visit a polling station on a Thursday, without the need to move the voting day.

- 3.2 There do not appear to be any convincing arguments in the consultation paper for a move to weekend elections. Reference is made to convenience to the voter mentioned and an Electoral Commission's report on voter engagement and young people. However, the consultation paper mentions only in passing, at para 59, that other factors are relevant. Many other research reports published since concerns arose at the decline in voter turnout have concluded that there are far more significant deterrents to voting than convenience of the voting arrangements. These include -:

- Voters feel that their vote will not make a difference
- There is a lack of trust in politicians
- Voters feel disengaged from politics – “they are all the same”

This was borne out by this Council's own survey conducted following the 2007 District & Parish elections, which showed a high degree of satisfaction with the polling station arrangements and postal voting as an alternative, while those who did not vote cited “lack of confidence in candidates/they don't make a difference” and “don't know what the candidates' policies are” as the main reasons for not voting.

4. THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

- 4.1 The consultation paper itself highlights the issues comprehensively and members are encouraged to read the extract attached at Appendix 1. Suggestions for detailed responses to each of the specific questions posed are set out in Appendix 2 as the basis for discussion by the Committee.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 None arising from responding to the consultation paper. However, it is clear that a move to weekend voting would have very considerable financial implications for all authorities managing elections in particular, and for all authorities with elected members as well, and for the taxpayer.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None

7. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None arising from responding to the consultation paper, but there might be implications if voting was moved to the weekend.

8. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There would be implications for religious communities if there was a move to weekend voting.

9. RECOMMENDATION:

- 9.1 That the Committee agrees a response to the consultation paper.

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Background papers:

Published documents

APPENDIX 1



Election Day

Weekend Voting

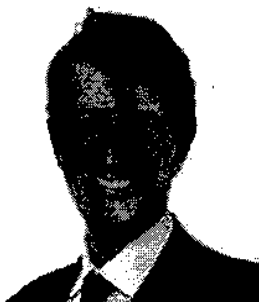
Presented to Parliament
by the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
by command of Her Majesty

June 2008

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Foreword



In the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper published last July, the Government set out an ambitious programme of constitutional renewal, aimed at forging a new relationship between Government and citizen. The act of voting is at the heart of the democratic process and a key part of reinvigorating our democracy is looking at how we can identify and remove barriers to the exercise of that right.

This consultation paper invites your 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 – for example, greater use of advance or remote voting. The paper sets out some of the key questions that would need to be addressed if these changes were made, such as what the costs of the change might be, and how to take account of the needs of religious groups.

This consultation exercise marks the start of a process of engagement. Your responses will form the basis for a Citizens' Summit later this year, at which a cross section of the public will be invited to consider the issue in detail and to make a recommendation to Parliament on whether Election Day should be moved to the weekend. I hope that this new form of policymaking will help the Government to engage better with the citizens it serves.

I also want to use that Summit to have a broader discussion about the factors that motivate people to exercise their right to vote. The sense of a civic "duty" to vote has eroded over the last 50 years. It is vital for all of us that we understand the reasons, and what we might be able to do to reverse the trend of falling turnout. The results will feed into the Government's discussion with citizens on the rights and responsibilities that we all share.

I hope that as wide a range as possible of individuals and groups will let us know their views on Election Day.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Wills". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Michael Wills
Minister of State for Justice

Executive summary

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.

One of the goals of the programme is to invigorate our 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. This paper focuses on the physical barriers to voting on Election Day.

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.

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

1. This paper aims to promote debate on the merits of moving the Election Day from Thursday to the weekend, and on the best way to do this.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. This consultation is being conducted in line with the Code of Practice on Consultation issued by the Cabinet Office and falls within the scope of the Code. The Consultation Criteria, which are set out on page 30 of this document, have been followed.
5. An Impact Assessment indicates that local authorities, electoral administrators, religious groups and schools in particular need to think around the impacts of a potential change. A change to polling day could lead to additional costs or savings for public sector and political parties. An Impact Assessment is attached at **Annex A**.

6. An Equality Impact Assessment will also be undertaken to cover any issues surrounding race, disability and gender. A Partial Equality Impact Assessment is attached at **Annex B**.

The Government would welcome views on both the Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment.

7. Copies of the consultation paper are being sent to:
 - The Electoral Commission
 - The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)
 - Electoral Registration Officers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
 - Local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
 - National Association of Local Councils
 - The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)
 - Society of Local Council Clerks
 - The Local Government Association
 - Political parties
 - Members of Parliament
 - Members of the Scottish Parliament
 - Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Members of the National Assembly for Wales
 - Devolved administrations (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales)
 - Faith groups
 - Operation Black Vote
 - Voluntary sector organisations working with those with disabilities
 - Help the Aged
 - Royal Mail
 - The Hansard Society
 - The Electoral Reform Society
 - The HS Chapman Society

8. This list is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive and responses are welcomed from anyone with an interest in or views on the subject covered by this paper¹.
9. The results from this consultation will be fed into a Citizens' Summit which will consider the physical and non-physical barriers to voting. A cross-section of the public will be invited to consider the issue in detail and to make a recommendation to Parliament on whether Election Day should be moved to the weekend.
10. On 20 May 2008 the Department for Communities and Local Government launched its consultation on moving the date for English local government elections to the date of the European parliamentary elections in 2009. This made reference to this consultation paper.

Funding a move to weekend voting

11. 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 the impact assessment are based on the cost of a General Election for which we do have 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. We expect this consultation to 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.

¹ The consultation paper has also been sent to other Government departments for their views and consideration.

The proposals

12. 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 general elections;
 - Local elections in England and Wales²; and
 - European Parliamentary elections³.
13. The purpose of this consultation paper is to gather information on the implications of such a change, which will form part of the input for consideration at a Citizens' Summit on the issue.
14. The Scotland and Wales Offices have confirmed that weekend voting could also be considered for future Scottish Parliament and National Assembly of Wales elections.

The current system in the UK

15. This section of the consultation paper sets out the current arrangements for the holding of elections across the United Kingdom. This includes the devolved administrations and local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
16. 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.

² 'Local elections' includes elections to single tier and two tier county councils and district councils (including those with borough or city status) metropolitan and London boroughs in England and to principal councils and community councils in Wales.

³ Although not originally cited in the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper, the Government feels that consideration should also be given to the merits of moving European Parliamentary elections to the weekend because these elections may be combined with local elections.

General Elections

17. Since 1945 every general election in the UK has taken place on a Thursday⁴. 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.

Local Elections in England and Wales

18. 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).

Other elections

Scotland

Scottish Parliament

19. The timing of elections to the Scottish Parliament is set out in the Scotland Act 1998. Section 2 of the Act states that elections shall normally be held on the first Thursday in May, every four years. However, the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer has the power to propose a day for holding the poll which is not more than one month earlier or one month later than the first Thursday in May. Her Majesty can then by proclamation under the Scottish Seal require the poll to be held on the day proposed.
20. The date for an extraordinary general election⁵ in Scotland is set by the same process of the Presiding Officer proposing the day and Her Majesty, by proclamation, requiring the poll to be held on the day proposed. This can be held on any day of the week.
21. The Presiding Officer also determines the date of the poll for a Scottish Parliamentary by-election, which can also be held on any day of the week.

⁴ There is no statutory requirement for a parliamentary election to be held on a Thursday. Under Rule 2 of the parliamentary rules, as set out in Schedule 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, an election may not be held on a number of designated days: at weekends, on bank holidays or on those days appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning. Such days are specified in the 1983 Act as *dies-non*, that is non-working days, and are therefore excluded for the purposes of the parliamentary election timetable.

⁵ Where the Scottish Parliament resolves that it should be dissolved as set out in the Scotland Act 1998, section 3.

Local elections in Scotland

22. Responsibility for local elections in Scotland is devolved to the Scottish Parliament under the provisions of the Scotland Act 1998. The ordinary date for those elections is set by section 43 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 as the first Thursday in May.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly

23. The timing of elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly is set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 31 (1) of the Act states that the date of the poll for the election of each Assembly shall be the first Thursday in May in the fourth calendar year following that on which its predecessor was elected; and the predecessor shall be dissolved at the beginning of the minimum period which ends with that date.
24. An extraordinary election in Northern Ireland takes place if the Assembly passes a resolution that it should be dissolved. The Secretary of State proposes a date for the poll for the election of the next Assembly⁶.

Local elections in Northern Ireland

25. The date for local elections in Northern Ireland is set by Section 11 (1A) of the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962, which, as amended, provides that the date for ordinary elections is the first Thursday in May.

Wales

National Assembly for Wales

26. The timing of elections to the National Assembly for Wales is determined in accordance with the Government of Wales Act 2006.
27. Section 3 of the 2006 Act provides that ordinary general elections are held on the first Thursday in May. However, Section 4 empowers the Secretary of State, after consultation with the Welsh Ministers, to provide for the poll to be held up to one month earlier or one month later. There is no restriction on such a poll taking place at a weekend.
28. Under Section 5 of the 2006 Act, the Secretary of State determines the date for an extraordinary general election. This can be on any day of the week.

⁶ This is reflected in the provisions under section 32 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

29. Under Section 10 of the 2006 Act, the date of a by-election is determined by the Assembly's Presiding Officer. This can also be any day of the week.

European Parliamentary elections

30. 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 place⁷.

Consistency across the United Kingdom

31. Any move of parliamentary general elections or local elections in England and Wales would mean that local elections would be held on different days in the different parts of the United Kingdom⁸.
32. Consideration will also need to be given therefore as to whether it is appropriate for Parliamentary, Local and European by elections to be moved to the weekend.

Experience in other countries

33. 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:

⁷ The rules set out in Schedule 1 to the European Parliamentary Elections Regulations 2004 (S.I. 2004/293) would need to be amended together with the mirror regulations European Parliamentary Elections (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004 (S.I. 2004/1267).

⁸ On the basis that "Election Day" is not moved to the weekend for local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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, Spain and Sweden
Thursday	The UK and Ireland		

The implications of weekend voting

34. The Government recognises that moving elections to the weekend would entail significant change. Possible reasons for change, issues and possible solutions are outlined below:

Possible reasons for change

Convenience

- 35. 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 increased turnout. In particular, given that the majority of people work on weekdays⁹, 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 providers¹⁰.
- 36. 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.
- 37. 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.

⁹ Figures compiled by the Office National Statistics (ONS) for April/June 2007 estimate that 74.59% of those in employment work during the weekday compared with 18.73% at the weekends (6.68% unknown). Estimates based on small sample sizes and are therefore subject to a margin of uncertainty.

¹⁰ Figures compiled by ONS for April/June 2007 estimate that 94.93% of childcare providers are female compared with 5.07% male (estimates based on small sample sizes and are therefore subject to a margin of uncertainty).

38. 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.

Levels of turnout

39. 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 weekdays¹¹. However, in his book on voter turnout¹², 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.
40. 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.
41. 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.¹³

Issues

Religious beliefs and observance

42. 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.

¹¹ Mark Franklin in *Electoral Participation in Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, ed. Laurence Leduc, Richard Niemi and Pippa Norris. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 214-233, 1996.

¹² *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹³ The Electoral Commission, *Voter Engagement and Young People*, July 2002.

43. 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 communities¹⁴. There would be cost implications in spreading voting over more than one day.

Resources

44. 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.
45. 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.
46. Voting at the weekend also has resource implications for political parties, candidates and agents. **The Government would like to hear the views of political parties on this point.**

¹⁴ *Official Report, House of Commons*, 30 November 1999, Vol 340, Column 172.

47. 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 42–45.

Polling station venues

48. 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.
49. Less frequent transport in rural areas at the weekend, particularly on Sundays, may impact on voters being able to get to a polling station.

Security

50. 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.

Exit polls

51. 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.

The timing of elections

52. If weekend voting were 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 May¹⁵. If weekend voting took place, say on

¹⁵ Section 37 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and others

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.**

Potential Solutions

53. 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.
54. 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.

Advance voting in polling stations

55. As part of the Government’s programme of piloting innovative voting methods, 20 local authorities have piloted advance voting in polling stations since 2000¹⁶. 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.

¹⁶ The following local authorities piloted advance voting at their local elections in 2007: Bedford, Broxbourne, Gateshead, Sheffield and Sunderland. Advance voting pilots have also previously been conducted using mobile polling stations.

Remote electronic voting

56. 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).¹⁷ Such remote voting could potentially take place either before or on polling day.
57. 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 Day¹⁸.

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.

Perceived advantages and disadvantages of voting in person

58. 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.

¹⁷ The Government is in the early stages of looking at the benefits and practicalities of remote e-voting. This will include addressing accessibility, costs, security and usability.

¹⁸ In 2007 remote e-voting pilots took place at local elections in the following areas: Rushmore, Sheffield, Shrewsbury and Atcham, South Bucks and Swindon.

- 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;
- 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.

Further considerations

59. Although this 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.
60. 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.

APPENDIX 2

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED RESPONSES FOR DISCUSSION BY COMMITTEE

1. **Do you think polling day should be a weekday, a Saturday, a Sunday, or take place over both Saturday and Sunday?**

- It would be wrong to consider moving polling day as an issue in isolation. The issue of increasing voter turnout should be reviewed in the broader strategic context of making the whole electoral process 'fit for purpose' in the 21st century. This consultation paper is addressing the mechanics of voting whereas the main issue appears to be communities' disengagement with the democratic process.
- There is no evidence that moving polling day will improve turnout. Making such a change is likely to replace one set of advantages and disadvantages with fresh ones which perhaps impact on different groups of electors
- Voting at weekends presents additional administrative challenges and is a cause for concern in rural areas where alternatives to using church premises and village halls often do not exist. Availability of staff at weekends is also a very important consideration.
- The costs of moving to weekend voting are extremely high, and we do not consider that this cost can be justified for what might be a marginal increase in turnout (although we remain to be convinced that there would be any increase at all).

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

- **Electors.** It is difficult to present a case that more people will be persuaded to vote if polling day is moved to the weekend. Weekends are often reserved for personal/family activities and leisure and these voters may find it less convenient to vote at weekends. For others, freedom from the pressure of work may make them more inclined to vote. Importantly, though, is the impact on faith groups and how they could be accommodated in weekend voting.
- **Polling Stations/Count Centres.** The availability of many traditional rural polling stations is a concern. Churches and Church Halls will almost certainly be unavailable. Village Halls can often have weekend bookings well in advance e.g. wedding receptions/local fetes and are unlikely to 'un do' confirmed reservations. It is not possible to give lengthy notice of by-elections and, in particular, a 'snap' general election would cause significant difficulties. We have very little choice of major venues for counts and it will be difficult to hire these at the weekend, which is the prime time for other activities.
- **Electoral Administrators.** There may be issues with some administrators and their faith placing them in conflict with weekend voting. Additional costs are likely to be incurred through the need for IT systems and technical support staff to be operational

over a weekend. Security staff may also be required at Council Offices which would otherwise have been closed.

- **Religious Groups.** There is likely to be an adverse impact on various faith groups if polling day is changed to either Saturday or Sunday. Polling over both days would help in mitigating electors' potential conflicts with religious observance – but this would be at significant extra cost.
- **Royal Mail.** Delivery of postal votes would be required on Saturday/Sunday with evening sweeps of mail centres necessary. Additional post box collections on Sunday to maximise returns would be preferable.
- **Candidates** might find it easier to canvass their supporters at weekends but this will not always be the case. Availability of tellers could be impacted.
- **Polling/count staff.** Significant difficulties are expected with employing staff of adequate calibre at weekends. These are dealt with in the response to Q7 below. Some will find working on a Saturday or Sunday would conflict with their religious beliefs.
- **Voting both days.** Ensuring that staff and premises are available for both Saturday and Sunday will present greater difficulties. Arrangements for ensuring the overnight security of the used ballot papers will be a particular concern.

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

- In principle, yes, particularly because of the religious observance implications. It is interesting to note that advance voting facilities are not available under the current arrangements for those who might not be able to vote in person at on the current voting day - they are obliged to make use of the absent voting arrangements. However, advance voting would no doubt be an advantage to some and is an option that should be considered as part of a broader strategic review of electoral processes.

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.

- It is hard to see what greater access there could be to postal voting. Postal voting is already available on all, on application.
- Electronic voting is supported as it is seen as an important additional convenient channel, provided security concerns, IT capacity issues nationally and the substantial costs issue are overcome (see fuller response to question 5).

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

Benefits:

- Convenience to the voter – they can vote at a time and place of their choice.
- Might encourage greater participation amongst the younger age groups

Drawbacks:

- The pilots undertaken so far have proved extremely costly – there would have to be substantial reductions in costs (which might well be likely) before this could become cost-effective.
- Pilots have shown concern at the capacity of the IT industry nationally to cope with e-voting across the country. No doubt these would be addressed if the need arose and finance was available, but it remains a concern.
- Security issues are likely to remain a concern – both from the point of view of the arrangements for providing appropriate security by way of pin numbers or passwords to voters to enable them to cast their votes on-line, and the security of the vote once cast.

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

- Yes, definitely.

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**

Resources

- By the Government's own estimates, moving to weekend voting will be extremely expensive. While the Government does fund the direct cost of national elections, the implications of a change would be of such magnitude that there would be a need for additional permanent staff and the associated on-costs such as office accommodation. There would have to be funding of these to local authorities but there would be a large extra burden on the taxpayer as a result.

Polling Station Venues

- This has not been evaluated for New Forest District, but it is expected that a number of church or village halls (and one church) used as polling stations in the District would not be available at weekends, and particularly not on Sundays.
- This might be offset to an extent by the possibility of using more school premises than at present, but smaller settlements with churches and church or village halls do not have a school.

- A choice would have to be made between discontinuing polling stations in some areas, and hiring mobile polling stations at considerable cost.

Security

- This would be a particular problem if polling stations were open on both Saturday and Sunday. Arrangements would have to be put in place to ensure the security of the ballot boxes and other election equipment overnight. This is likely to be very costly.

Administration of the election

- The successful delivery of major elections relies greatly on support and co-operation from many Council employees, not just elections teams. The support comes from many areas – the wider democratic services team, secretaries, caretakers, ICT, customer services, and from senior and junior employees alike. This support will not be as readily available at weekends. This will have a significant impact.
- Considerable difficulty is foreseen in recruiting polling staff of the required calibre at weekends. It is common practice for local authorities (including New Forest District Council) to grant employees a day away from work without loss of pay to work on the election. Many Council employees are likely to be unwilling to work at weekends, either at all, or without a substantially increased fee. The employment of experienced local authority employees in roles such as Presiding Officers, Polling Station Inspectors and Count Supervisors is absolutely crucial to the successful delivery of elections.
- There would also be implications for the recruitment of count staff. We have experience of this with the European elections where it has been found very difficult to recruit sufficient staff for the counts on Sunday evenings. Large sporting and other recreational events are held at weekends and, coupled with general reluctance to work at weekends, these have contributed to the difficulties.
- There would be effects on the postal voting process and the times for delivery of postal votes.
- If voting was moved to a weekend, it is doubtful that there would be a demand for voting hours to be 7.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. These hours are intended to cater for people to vote en route to and from work. Indeed, there might be some security concerns at certain polling stations located close to pubs or other places of entertainment, for the stations to be open until 10.00 p.m. Shorter voting hours might be feasible.

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?

- There is no objection to this proposal.

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

Sometimes barriers are perceived rather than real and are reflective of the current apathy and disengagement with democratic processes. Moving polling day, by itself, does little to address the reasons why people choose not to vote.

Other, more meaningful, issues to be considered might be:

- The lack of information on candidates and what they stand for prevents informed choice, or any choice at all. This is a consistent theme of phone calls received by the electoral services team.
- Postal voters who are going away for two weeks' holiday complain that the electoral timetable does not allow the issue of their ballot papers in time for them to cast their votes. The option of a proxy vote, as an alternative, is not widely accepted as many voters wish to keep their votes secret.
- The complexity of the postal vote documentation, which has, on the one hand, improved security of the postal voting process, but on the other has disadvantaged many of the people, such as the elderly, who prefer to vote by this method.