Election timetables in the United Kingdom

Report and recommendations
The Electoral Commission

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


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Executive summary

This review has examined current timetables for elections in the United Kingdom and the case for changes to the present legal framework. The aim has been to determine whether adjustments to the various statutory election timetables might contribute to the development of a more efficient, effective and practical system of electoral administration and facilitate participation in elections.

This review is part of a wider programme of reviews being conducted by the Commission following our statutory report on the 2001 general election. In Election 2001: The Official Results, the Commission indicated its intention to undertake a review of the timetable for Parliamentary general elections including an appraisal of the case for fixing the term of the Westminster Parliament. We intend to examine the issue of fixed-term Parliaments separately, following the completion of our review of election timetables.

Principles and priorities

The Commission has adopted as a primary corporate aim the encouragement of greater participation in, and increased understanding of, the democratic process. This review has been directed primarily at making election timetables more intelligible, straightforward and user-friendly for voters, candidates and political parties. We have also been mindful of the need to develop timetable arrangements that will be less complicated for electoral administrators to work with, in line with our further corporate aim of fostering best practice in the administration of elections. In the light of these broad aims, the Commission has sought to develop a more consistent and less complex approach to the timetabling of elections in the UK.

Conclusions and recommendations

Timetable consistency

There should be a consistent length for all UK election timetables. The standard length should be fixed at 25 days. In the cases of Parliamentary general and by-elections, however, the additional stages of proclaiming the dissolution of Parliament and/or issue of writ will need to be retained. These should be represented as the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh days before polling day. Election timetables should also be consistent in relation to the deadlines that structure those timetables.

Parliamentary general and by-election timetables should be calculated backwards from the date of poll, so bringing them into line with all other UK election timetables.

Deadlines that are currently fixed at the discretion of the Returning Officer should not be fixed by statute or secondary legislation. Instead, local flexibility with respect to matters such as the issuing and opening of postal votes, and delivery of poll cards, should be preserved. The Commission will work with electoral administrators and their professional bodies to develop and disseminate best practice in this regard.
Polling hours

Polling hours for local government elections in England and Wales, and Greater London Authority elections, should be set at 7am to 10pm, so bringing them into line with hours of poll for national elections. In order to maximise and maintain consistency, we believe that the same polling hours should be adopted for Scottish local government and community council elections; community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales; and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

Weekend voting, dies non and other issues

In relation to weekend voting, there should be:

- encouragement for further experiments with weekend voting in place of Thursday voting;
- no change with respect to the dies non status of Saturday and Sunday at present;
- a more thorough assessment of the potential resource, practical and cultural issues that might arise were weekend voting to be introduced on a broader scale than at present.

Maundy Thursday should be removed from the dies non provisions with respect to the following categories of election and related by-elections:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- Scottish Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Greater London Authority;
- Local Government (England and Wales);
- Local Government (Northern Ireland).

In order to maximise and maintain consistency of election timetable computation, Maundy Thursday should be removed from the dies non provisions for community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales, and should not be considered a dies non when computing election timetables for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

Clarifying the existing statutory provisions regarding days of mourning is not a pressing issue. The Commission recommends that the Government considers the practicability of defining in legislation days of public thanksgiving and mourning, with the aim of facilitating levels of understanding about which events might impact on the computation of election timetables.

Our separate review of the registration process concluded that individuals should be allowed to register up to six days before an election. The Commission’s review of nomination procedures recommended a 24-hour ‘checking period’ to identify and clarify errors, and raise objections. This period would run from 4pm on the seventeenth day to 4pm on the sixteenth day before polling. The Commission’s proposals concerning the registration and nominations process should be incorporated into the recommended 25-day timetable.

Recommended timetable

The timetable set out below should be the model for the following categories of election and related by-elections:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- Scottish Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Greater London Authority;
- Local Government (England and Wales);
- Local Government (Northern Ireland).

In order to maximise and maintain consistency across timetables, we hope that the model will also be adopted for Scottish local government and community council elections; community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales; and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.
**Recommended election timetable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceeding</th>
<th>Day before poll</th>
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<tr>
<td>Proclamation/issue of writ (Parliamentary general and by-elections)</td>
<td>-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of writ (Parliamentary general and by-elections)</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest date for publication of notice of election</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for delivery of nomination papers: not later than noon</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for appointment of election agents: not later than noon</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional statement of persons nominated published not later than 4pm</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for withdrawals of candidature: not later than noon</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of 24-hour checking period 4pm with final publication of statement of persons nominated</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for requests to change an existing postal vote or proxy appointment: not later than 5pm</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest date for publication of notice of poll</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for receipt of new absent vote applications 5pm*</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last date for elector registration (where individuals can show they have been resident or have had a local connection for three months)</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for appointment of polling and counting agents</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polling day 7am–10pm</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications for replacement spoilt or lost postal ballot papers: not later than 5pm</td>
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* The different absent voting deadlines would continue to apply in Northern Ireland

**Implementation**

The process of aligning timetables will involve amendments to election rules and different sections of the Representation of the People Acts. In short, the process will entail a major drafting exercise. However, we believe that the outcome will be a timetable that is clear and accessible to all stakeholders and one that is easily adjusted when necessary. We intend to work closely with electoral administrators and the Government in the process of implementing any changes to election timetables that flow from our review.
This report sets out our views and recommendations on election timetables in the United Kingdom. The review of election timetables is part of a wider programme of reviews of electoral law and practice following our statutory report on the 2001 general election.

Background

1.1 The Electoral Commission is a public body established on 30 November 2000 under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent of Government and political parties, and is directly accountable to Parliament. Among the Commission’s general statutory functions is a duty to keep under review a range of electoral and political matters.¹

1.2 This review has examined current timetables for elections in the UK and the case for changes to the present legal framework. The aim has been to determine whether adjustments to the various statutory election timetables might contribute to the development of a more efficient, effective and practical system of electoral administration and facilitate participation in elections. This review is part of a wider programme of reviews being conducted by the Commission following our statutory report on the 2001 general election. In Election 2001: The Official Results, the Commission indicated its intention to undertake a review of the timetable for general elections, including an appraisal of the case for fixing the term of the Westminster Parliament. We intend to examine the issue of fixed-term Parliaments separately, following the completion of this review of election timetables.

Review process

1.3 This report has been prepared by staff of The Electoral Commission, working with a small Project Board comprising Sam Younger, Chairman of the Commission, and Oonagh Gay of the House of Commons Library (currently on secondment to The Constitution Unit, University College London), and reporting to the Commissioners. The views and conclusions presented in this report are those of The Electoral Commission alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of individual Project Board members.

¹ Section 6 of PPERA
1.4 Following preliminary research carried out by Commission staff and Oonagh Gay, we issued a consultation paper in January 2003. This paper was sent directly to Electoral Services Managers, Returning Officers, registered political parties, elected representatives, as well as interest groups and academics. It was also available to the public on the Commission website. A total of 132 responses were received from a variety of stakeholders, including local authorities, political parties, election agents, Members of Parliament and interest groups, as well as a small number of members of the public.

1.5 The consultation paper provided background information about previous reviews and the statutory basis of election timetables. It also invited comment on a range of issues, including the principle of timetable consistency, timetable length, days not considered for the purposes of timetable computation (dies non), and the various deadlines, or cut-off points, which apply to election timetables. The paper also sought views on whether a proposed 25-day timetable should form the model for statutory elections in the UK.

1.6 Copies of the consultation paper are available from the Commission and can be viewed or downloaded from our website. A list of respondents to the paper is in Appendix 1 and the responses are referred to and summarised in this report. Individual responses can be viewed in person at the Commission, except where confidentiality was requested.

Priorities and principles

1.7 The Commission believes that there is a need to modernise election timetables in the UK as part of a wider process of modernising the electoral process. The fundamentals of the Parliamentary general election timetable remain as set by the Representation of the People Act 1918. For elections to other democratic bodies, different timetables have been adopted, but each involves the same basic stages. Throughout this review we have sought to identify areas where practical improvements might be made with the overarching aim of formulating a timetable suitable for use in twenty-first century elections. The various elements of election timetables – such as their length, computation, overall structure and polling hours – can impact on a range of important stakeholders, including voters, candidates, election agents, political parties and electoral administrators. The interests of these stakeholders are not always the same, nor is the best outcome of the review necessarily based on compromise. It is, therefore, important at the outset of this report to be clear about the priorities of the Commission and the principles that underpin the conclusions and recommendations we reach in this report.

1.8 The Commission has adopted as a primary corporate aim the encouragement of greater participation in, and increased understanding of, the democratic process. This review has been directed primarily at making election timetables more intelligible, straightforward and user-friendly for voters, candidates and political parties. We have also been mindful of the need to develop timetable arrangements that will be less complicated for electoral administrators to work with, in line with our further corporate aim of fostering best practice in the administration of elections. In the light of these broad aims, the Commission has sought to develop a more consistent and less complex approach to the timetabling of elections in the UK.

Scope

1.9 This review considers the need for any change to current timetables for elections in the UK. The review covers timetables that apply to the following UK elections and by-elections, as identified in sections 5 and 6 of PPERA:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- Scottish Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;

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3 www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
• Greater London Authority (GLA);
• Local Government (England and Wales);
• Local Government (Northern Ireland).

1.10 The review has not looked in detail at community, parish and mayoral election timetables in England and Wales, since these elections fall outside the scope of sections 5 and 6 of PPERA. Nor has it considered the Scottish local government election timetable which, under section 42 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by section 53 of the Scotland Act 1998, is a matter for the Scottish Parliament. However, we hope that the recommendations made in this report will be applied to all statutory elections, including those for any newly created democratic institutions such as directly elected regional assemblies.

1.11 The review does not consider non-statutory elections such as parish polls or any other form of referendums.

Recommendations

1.12 This report has been submitted to the Lord Chancellor and Deputy Prime Minister (Secretary of State), in accordance with section 6 of PPERA. While we have a statutory duty to keep these matters under review, the Commission’s role with respect to electoral law is advisory. It is not for the Commission to make the final determination as to how arrangements might be changed and we have no powers to ensure implementation of any recommendations we make. It is for the Government to initiate, and ultimately Parliament to decide on, any changes to procedures and proposals for legislative change.
2 Timetable consistency

The Electoral Commission’s report on the 2001 general election drew attention to the disparity between timetable length for Parliamentary general elections and that for local and other UK elections. We also highlighted the confusion caused by combining the general election with local and by-elections in parts of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the significant problems created for administrators, election agents and candidates as a result of the tight general election timetable. Our subsequent research and consultation have confirmed our initial impression that the general election timetable is too short and that there is a need for greater consistency across election timetables.

2.1 Most UK elections are run according to fixed 25-day statutory timetables, with different cut-off dates (e.g. last day for delivery of nomination papers, publication of statement of persons nominated) according to the type of election. Our consultation paper on election timetables provided detailed information about the statutory form of election timetables, including their comparative length, composition and methods of computation.

2.2 The differences in the statutory timetables inevitably reflect the concerns of politicians and others at the time each new form of election was introduced, and the timetables of more recently created democratic institutions (the devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the GLA) also reflect experience of managing elections to older institutions. In adopting different timetables for different elections, the UK is not unusual in international terms. For example, the United States operates various election timetables according to the category of election, e.g. Presidential, Congressional, state and local government. In Australia, the Constitution and Commonwealth Electoral Act stipulates that the length of the timetable for a general election can vary between 33 and 68 days from the issue of writs. State and territory elections in Australia are also characterised by different statutory timetables.

2.3 In undertaking this review, we identified early on the need to consider the issue of timetable consistency.

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4 It should be noted that all references in this report to the length of election timetables relate to ‘working’ days as opposed to calendar days. For example, a reference to 25 days would refer to 25 days excluding days disregarded for the purposes of computing election timetables (dies non). For a fuller discussion of dies non, see chapter 5 of this report.

5 Current exceptions to the 25-day norm include the Parliamentary general election timetable, which runs for 17 working days, the timetable for Parliamentary by-elections, which can vary between 15 and 19 working days, and the Scottish Parliament timetable, which can vary between 21 and 28 days. In addition, the Government has recently consulted on the suggestion that the GLA timetable might be extended by seven days, from 25 to 32 days. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were due to take place on 29 May 2003, having been put back from 1 May 2003 by the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections Act 2003. On 1 May 2003 the Government announced that these elections would be postponed until the autumn, and on 9 May 2003 the Northern Ireland (Elections and Periods of Suspension) Bill was published. Clause 1(4) of the Bill specifies that the date for the publication of notice of election would be not later than the twentieth day before the poll, rather than the twenty-fifth day as set out in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order 2001.
In our consultation exercise, we invited comments and views on two issues of principle. The first issue concerned consistency of length — specifically, whether it would be desirable in principle to have consistency across election timetables in this respect. If it was agreed that such consistency was desirable, we then asked whether 25 days, the most common length, was the most appropriate, or whether some other length would be more suitable. The second issue of principle concerned consistency of timetable structure — in particular, whether the timing of the various proceedings (deadlines) should be uniform regardless of the type of election.

Problems of inconsistency

2.4 Our concern to examine the issue of consistency was not prompted by a desire for order for its own sake. We accept that there may be good reasons why different elections might require different approaches in a number of respects, including the time needed between commencement of the process and polling day. However, we were also struck by the pressures imposed by the Parliamentary timetable on Returning Officers and their staff at the 2001 general election, which took place alongside local elections in many parts of England. During the course of our research and consultation, we have explored these issues further and identified two major problems which arise from the current approach to the timetabling of elections in the UK:

• the confusion and risk of error that can arise as a consequence of applying different timetables to different types of election;
• the administrative difficulties that can occur as a result of the relative shortness of the Parliamentary general and by-election timetables.

2.5 The Commission believes that these problems can have consequences for electors, candidates, election agents, political parties and electoral administrators. Both types of problem can be exacerbated by the holding of combined elections where different timetable lengths, methods of computation and deadlines can apply. That is particularly important given the increasing frequency with which combined elections are taking place (an inevitable consequence, perhaps, of the increased number of elected bodies at different levels of government within the UK). These consequences are described more fully below.

Confusion and risk of error

2.6 The current timetable system is a complex one characterised by glaring inconsistencies. For example, the timetables for Parliamentary general and by-elections are computed forward from the day of the proclamation and/or issue of writ, while all other election timetables are calculated backwards from polling day. With regard to length, the Parliamentary general election timetable runs for 17 days, while the length of most other timetables is 25 days. In relation to structure, the timing of proceedings varies from one timetable to the next and this inconsistency applies even when local government and Parliamentary elections have the same polling day (combined elections).

2.7 From the voter’s perspective, inconsistent polling hours at local and Parliamentary general elections can cause confusion and do little to encourage understanding of, and participation in, the democratic process. Other elements of the timetable have little direct impact on voters.

2.8 However, we believe that the inconsistent character of election timetables can generate confusion for political parties, candidates and election agents, particularly among those who are new to the electoral process and independent candidates who do not have the backing of a party machine to explain the process. The complicated nature of timetable arrangements may result in some candidates unwittingly missing deadlines or becoming disillusioned with the entire process. These unfortunate outcomes may be more likely to occur in the event of combined Parliamentary and local government elections, where, as already mentioned, methods of timetable computation and deadlines differ despite a shared polling day. Among electoral administrators, the complicated nature of election timetables may give rise to a greater risk of error which, again, may be heightened in the event of combined elections.

\footnote{The issue of polling hours is addressed at length in chapter 4 of this report.}
2.9 One of the key timetable-related issues to emerge out of our report on the 2001 general election was that of the shorter length of the Parliamentary general election timetable. In our consultation paper, we identified two main difficulties caused by the timetable’s brevity:

- A heavy workload for electoral administrators, particularly in light of the changes introduced by the Representation of the People Act 2000, which introduced postal voting on demand and allowed a postal or proxy vote application to be accepted up to six – rather than 11 – working days before the poll.
- A very short timescale for electors to organise a postal vote for a particular election – at present voters have two weeks from the issuing of writs to send in applications.

2.10 The timetable for a Parliamentary by-election is often shorter than for a Parliamentary general election. In addition, the amount of notice given for a Parliamentary by-election also tends to be much shorter than for a general election, since there is no public announcement of the election until the writ is moved. In recent times, Parliamentary by-elections have generally been set to the shortest possible deadline of 15 days. This can cause particular problems for a variety of stakeholders:

- There are often more candidates than usual at a general election, often fielded by new or minor parties. This puts added organisational pressure on electoral administrators.
- Electors may be unaware of the need to register or to obtain a postal vote well in advance.
- Candidates are given little time to get their message across to voters, resulting in a rushed campaign in which electors are insufficiently informed.
- Electoral administrators, political parties and voters will not have much notice of the day of polling, causing logistical difficulties.

Benefits of current timetable arrangements

2.11 As already indicated, we accept that there may, in principle, be good reasons why different elections might require different approaches in a number of respects, including the time needed between commencement of the process and polling day. However, we are not convinced that the current inconsistencies in election timetables are based on anything other than historical accident, and the prevailing political pressures at the time different legislation was passed. Moreover, our research and consultation have identified very few reasons for preserving current timetable arrangements. Those identified by a handful of respondents to our consultation exercise included:

- The argument that standardising timetable length to 25 days would have the effect of prolonging general election campaigns, with the risk of further undermining levels of interest among voters.
- Linked to this, some argued that a very short period for elections could assist efforts to engage electors by focusing candidates’ campaigning activities on a limited period; for example, one MP argued that Parliamentary general and by-election campaigns are by nature intense and ideally suited to a short timetable.
- The current system allows flexibility to reflect the different cultures and needs of the different parts of the UK. A timetable which may be appropriate for one election may not in every respect suit another. For example, the current Northern Ireland Assembly and local government election timetables allow just two days for the delivery of nomination papers. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland suggested to us that allowing more time for nominations (along the lines of other UK election timetables) would create practical difficulties for electoral administrators, particularly given their need to concentrate on checking absent vote applications.

2.12 Regarding the first concern, we do not consider that lengthening the general, or indeed by-election, timetables would have the effect of reducing levels of voter interest in an election. While, in theory, the minimum length of a
general election campaign can be as short as 17 working days, in practice it is usually much longer. In 2001 the Prime Minister announced the election date of 7 June on 8 May, while in 1997 the election of 1 May was announced on March 17 – a campaign period of 44 days, one of the longest of modern times. In other words, it is unlikely that increasing the length of the statutory timetable would have any effect on the duration of election campaigns, which tend to begin well before the start of the formal timetable.

2.13 We acknowledge that some stakeholders – notably politicians – may argue for the shortest possible Parliamentary and by-election timetables. On balance, however, we do not consider that this argument outweighs the very real benefits that would come for electors, political parties, administrators and others as a result of extending the Parliamentary general and by-election timetables. These include:

- more time for candidates and election agents to organise, complete and return nomination papers;
- more time for voters to organise a postal vote;
- less risk of confusion, particularly in the case of combined elections, on account of the uniformity of timetable length;
- more time for candidates to prepare and distribute election material and to communicate their message to voters;
- a less pressurised working environment for electoral administrators as a result of the latter having more time to organise the election.

2.14 In short, we believe that consistency in the timetabling of elections would do much to assist electors, candidates, political parties and administrators. While we note that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland does not favour extending the deadline for delivery of nomination papers on account of the time needed to check absent vote applications, we are not persuaded that this point overrides the argument for overall timetable consistency. We recognise that the process of checking absent voting applications can be more protracted in Northern Ireland and consider that sufficient funding should be made available to ensure that this can be conducted thoroughly within the new timetable.

Support for change

2.15 Respondents to the consultation paper broadly agreed with our analysis that the current system of timetabling elections is unnecessarily confusing and that the timetables for Parliamentary and by-elections are too short to allow for the efficient administration of an election. As one Member of the Scottish Parliament (also previously a Member of Parliament) explained:

I consider it would be sensible to support a consistent approach towards the timetabling of all types of election. Uniformity in the organisation of elections would reduce the potential for confusion amongst political parties and candidates, particularly in the case of combined elections.

2.16 Almost all respondents agreed with the principle that there should be consistency of length in relation to election timetables. The vast majority also agreed that 25 days was an appropriate standard timetable length and many stated that this had worked well in the context of local government elections. However, several respondents argued for alternative lengths, namely 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 or 32 days (the proposed new GLA model). A few respondents who supported 25 days qualified this by stating that this should be the minimum length and, if possible, they would prefer election timetables to be longer. These ‘extra’ days, it was argued, would allow greater time for electoral administrators to complete vital tasks during the period between the close of nominations and the first issue of postal ballot papers. One respondent argued that Returning Officers were finding it increasingly difficult to second existing staff from other sections or departments to provide additional clerical support and that a 30-day timetable would help offset this problem.

2.17 The following view, submitted by a group of electoral administrators, is broadly representative of the general view on the principle of a standard 25-day election timetable:
The 25-day timetable would, in our view, be the most appropriate one allowing events to be properly organised. The short timetable used for Parliamentary elections is one which is difficult to explain, even to candidates, and as administrators is an abominable one to work within (counting forward from issue of the writ instead of backwards from election day). Whilst there is always speculation as to the date of a Parliamentary election, as administrators we are trying to organise an election and count which can happen within such a short space of time. No regard is given to the booking of polling stations, staffing stations, printing and distributing poll cards and ballot papers etc. A 17-day timetable is one which simply throws Acting Returning Officers and their staff at the mercy and goodwill of others. It is an acknowledgement of these administrators’ skills and knowledge that these elections are held.

2.18 We consider that 25 days is the appropriate period that should allow for the effective organisation and administration of an election. In addition, since most elections are run perfectly well on the basis of a 25-day timetable, we see no reason why the standard length should be longer. Of course, we are aware that the Government Office for London (GOL) is considering lengthening the GLA timetable by seven days to 32 days on the grounds that this would enable better planning and preparation for the elections, in particular, in relation to the printing and distribution of ballot papers and the election book, which contains the election addresses of candidates. Yet as the discussion in this chapter indicates, we believe that there are very strong arguments for the consistent timetabling of all elections. On 6 May 2003 the Government confirmed its intention to combine the 2004 GLA and European elections. Our understanding is that the Greater London Returning Officer will be obliged to run both elections according to the European Parliament 25-day timetable. Indeed, it is unlikely that any changes to the GLA timetable would become effective before the 2008 elections.

2.19 There was also widespread agreement from respondents on the principle that there should be consistency regarding the deadlines that structure election timetables. However, there was some disagreement as to precisely how a consistent timetable should be structured. While the majority of respondents favoured the suggested timetable we set out in our consultation paper, a significant minority raised some important practical issues in relation to some of the specified deadlines. In the next chapter, we develop an amended 25-day timetable, which takes into account some of the concerns raised.

2.20 In general, respondents were also supportive of our proposal to standardise the method of timetable computation, so that Parliamentary general and by-election timetables would in future be calculated backwards from polling day. The effect of this would be that those timetables would achieve complete numerical alignment with the timetable for local government and other elections. In our consultation paper we pointed out that the proclamation dissolving Parliament and the issue of writs form an integral part of the Parliamentary general election timetable. We maintain that these stages (together with the issue of writ stage in the case of Parliamentary by-elections) would need to be retained in any new timetable computed backwards from polling day.

The Commission recommends that there should be a consistent length for all UK election timetables. The standard length should be fixed at 25 days. In the cases of Parliamentary general and by-elections, however, the additional stages of proclaiming the dissolution of Parliament and/or issue of writ will need to be retained. These should be represented as the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh days before polling day.
Election timetables for the following categories of election and related by-elections should be consistent with respect to the deadlines that structure those timetables:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- Scottish Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Greater London Authority;
- Local Government (England and Wales);
- Local Government (Northern Ireland).

In order to maximise and maintain consistency across timetables, we believe that uniform deadlines should be set for Scottish local government and community council elections; community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales; and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

Parliamentary general and by-election timetables should be calculated backwards from the date of poll, so bringing them into line with all other UK election timetables.
3 Modernising election timetables

In our consultation paper, we stated that if we concluded that consistency was desirable, and the Parliamentary and by-election timetables were too short, then the most obvious solution would be to apply an amended 25-day local government timetable to these elections. In this chapter we set out our recommendations for a consistent 25-day timetable applicable to all elections in the UK.

Prototype election timetable

3.1 One of the more controversial areas of our consultation paper proved to be chapter 6, which discussed a range of technical issues and which culminated in the presentation of a model 25-day timetable that might be applied to all UK elections. This timetable is produced again below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceeding</th>
<th>Day before poll</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proclamation/issue of writ (applies to Parliamentary general and by-elections only)</td>
<td>-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of writ (applies to Parliamentary general and by-elections only)</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest date for publication of notice of election</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for delivery of nomination papers noon and delivery of notices of withdrawals noon. Last day for the appointment of election agents noon. Publication of statement of persons nominated 5pm</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close of applications for postal and proxy votes 5pm*</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for appointment of polling and counting agents</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue of replacement ballot papers for lost or spoilt ballot papers 5pm</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polling day</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The different absent voting deadlines would continue to apply in Northern Ireland

3.2 While the majority of respondents to our consultation paper did favour the model timetable set out above, a number of criticisms were raised. A principal area of concern related to the proposed timetable for nominations. A number of respondents argued that the timings set out in our prototype timetable would do little to ease the considerable pressures on elections staff. A handful of electoral administrators argued that the proposal to close nominations and notice of withdrawals on the same date and time could cause problems, particularly in relation to parish council elections, in which candidates sometimes choose to withdraw their nominations once the statement of persons nominated

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As set out in The Electoral Commission (January 2003) Election timetables in the UK: Consultation paper

Election timetables in the United Kingdom: modernising election timetables
has been published and confirmed that others have put their names forward. It was pointed out that candidates might do this in order to save election costs being recharged to relatively small parishes. We accept that withdrawals of candidature may be more of an issue at parish elections and that candidates should for a short period following close of nominations be allowed to withdraw.

3.3 One respondent argued that a gap between close of nominations and the publication of statement of persons nominated would be useful in order to check the accuracy of information on nomination papers. The need for a 24-hour ‘checking period’ to identify and clarify errors, and to raise objections, was also identified in our separate review of nomination procedures and the final report recommends that this should be incorporated into a revised nominations timetable. This 24-hour period – beginning with the provisional publication of statement of persons nominated and ending with its final publication – has consequently been built into the revised 25-day election timetable.

3.4 An additional area of concern related to the last day for the appointment of polling and counting agents. In the consultation paper we suggested that it might be appropriate to standardise this as the second day before polling. However, a large number of respondents objected to this suggestion, pointing out that this would put extra pressure on electoral administrators to receive notice and issue tickets for the count. We accept that this could cause difficulties and therefore recommend that the deadline for the appointment of polling and counting agents should be fixed at the fifth day before polling, as currently applies for local government elections in England and Wales. On a further issue, respondents broadly agreed that the latest date for publication of notice of election should be set as the twenty-fifth day before poll for all elections.

3.5 In relation to absent voting, our recently published report concluded that, on balance, there was no need present to change the timetable and that the deadline for new applications should remain as the sixth day before polling. However, it did recommend that ‘lost’ postal ballot papers should, on correct application by voters, be replaceable at any point up to 5pm on polling day. Although the issue of replacements for spoilt postal ballot papers did not emerge as an issue in the absent voting review, we believe it would make sense to align the deadline with that recommended for the replacement of lost postal ballot papers. This deadline has, therefore, been incorporated into the amended timetable.

3.6 Our review did not consider arrangements for absent voting in Northern Ireland, which will be considered separately in the Commission’s statutory report on the conduct of the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. These elections were recently postponed until later this year.

3.7 In addition, our review of election timetables did not consider issues relating to the publication of the electoral register – more specifically, whether it is might be desirable or possible to enable voters to register up to and including polling day – since these were dealt with separately as part of our review of the process of electoral registration. In our final report, we recommended that the last date for registration should normally be the close of nominations but, where individuals can show they have been resident or have had a local connection for three months, registration should be allowed up to six days before an election. This new proposed deadline should be integrated into the recommended 25-day timetable.

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Table 2: Recommended election timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceeding</th>
<th>Day before poll</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proclamation/issue of writ (Parliamentary and by-elections)</td>
<td>-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of writ (Parliamentary and by-elections)</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest date for publication of notice of election</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for delivery of nomination papers: not later than noon</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for appointment of election agents: not later than noon</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional statement of persons nominated published not later than 4pm</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for withdrawals of candidature: not later than noon</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of 24 hour checking period 4pm with final publication of statement of persons nominated</td>
<td>-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for requests to change an existing postal vote or proxy appointment: not later than 5pm</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest date for publication of notice of poll</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for receipt of new absent vote applications 5pm*</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last date for elector registration (where individuals can show they have been resident or have had a local connection for three months)</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day for appointment of polling and counting agents</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polling day†</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications for replacement spoil or lost postal ballot papers: not later than 5pm</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The different absent voting deadlines would continue to apply in Northern Ireland.
† See chapter 4 for a discussion of, and recommendations relating to, polling hours.

The Commission recommends that the timetable set out in Table 2 should be the model for the following categories of election and related by-elections:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- Scottish Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Greater London Authority;
- Local government (England and Wales);
- Local government (Northern Ireland).

In order to maximise and maintain consistency across timetables, we hope that the model will be adopted for Scottish local government and community council elections; community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales; and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

Discretionary deadlines

3.8 Our consultation paper also asked for views on whether deadlines that are currently fixed at the discretion of the Returning Officer for each election should be fixed in legislation in order to ensure even greater consistency in the administration of an election. The vast majority of respondents did not support this proposal. One Electoral Services Manager stated:
The issuing and opening of postal votes should be left to the discretion of the returning officer, depending on the local circumstances regarding volume, etc. Likewise, we feel the delivery of poll cards should also be left to the returning officer’s discretion to allow for local conditions.

3.9 Another electoral administrator from a local authority in the south of England pointed out that the issuing and opening of postal votes could be affected by practical issues such as the availability of staff, rooms or other resources and that this was reason enough for preserving flexibility. We agree that the flexibility inherent in the use of the Returning Officer’s discretion for these matters is in almost all circumstances beneficial, and there are unlikely to be significant advantages in imposing standardisation. However, we also believe that there is scope for the sharing of good practice and development of protocols in some areas – for example, in relation to the development of a model postal delivery contract for use locally as recommended in our recently published report on absent voting.11

The Commission recommends that deadlines that are currently fixed at the discretion of the Returning Officer should not be fixed by statute or secondary legislation. Instead, local flexibility with respect to matters such as the issuing and opening of postal votes, and delivery of poll cards, should be preserved. The Commission will also work with electoral administrators and their professional bodies to develop and disseminate best practice in this regard.

4 Polling hours

At present, polling hours at local government elections in England and Wales are set at 8am to 9pm, while for all national elections hours of polling are 7am to 10pm. In the case of combined elections, however, the regulations provide for the hours of 7am to 10pm.\footnote{Local Elections (Principal Areas) Rules 1986, Schedule 1, paragraph 4.}

4.1 We set out our view in the consultation paper that there is a strong case for standardising polling hours at statutory elections. We believe that this would minimise the risk of public confusion and provide greater opportunity for those wishing to exercise their democratic right. This chapter examines the case for and against aligning polling hours, drawing upon research and evidence submitted as part of our consultation with stakeholders.

Standardisation

4.2 The vast majority of respondents to our consultation paper responded enthusiastically to the proposal that polling hours should be standardised. Most agreed with our contention that the present arrangements, which provide for different hours of poll in the case of local government elections in England, Scotland and Wales, can cause confusion among voters. As one Electoral Services Manager pointed out:

We are aware that some electors are confused by the different hours of poll that apply at different types of election. Despite the delivery of poll cards, a small number of electors do attend local government election polling stations between 7am to 8am. We have never heard of anyone attending between 9pm and 10pm – it probably happens but no complaints have been received (London Borough).

4.3 One organisation’s response, however, expressed support for an alignment of polling, but also suggested that there may be a case for giving Returning Officers the flexibility to ‘extend hours of the local election to be aligned with the hours of national elections if they believe that it would be beneficial to allow access and increase turnout within their local area’. This was because ‘the social and geographic make up of areas varies enormously across the country’.

4.4 On the basis of our research and review of consultation responses, we remain of the view that the alignment of polling hours would constitute a small but important step forward in the process of developing a more straightforward and less confusing system of electoral administration. This could only be of benefit to electors.
Hours of poll

4.5 In our consultation paper we proposed that polling hours for all elections should be set at 7am to 10pm. There are four main reasons why we believe these hours should be the preferred option:

• 7am to 10pm would seem to be the most straightforward option, given that these hours of poll already apply to most statutory elections in the UK.

• The hours of 7am to 10pm already apply at combined elections and, with the increased frequency of such elections, it would make sense to introduce standard polling hours for all elections.

• 7am to 10pm would give extra time to vote in person at polling stations. It would benefit electors wishing to vote before work in the morning and after work in the evening.

• Extra polling hours would broaden access to the democratic process and may have a positive impact on turnout at local elections.

4.6 Despite there being common support for the principle of standardising polling hours from respondents to the consultation exercise, there was considerable disagreement as to what those standard hours should be. Of the respondents, approximately half agreed with the proposed hours of 7am to 10pm, with the other half suggesting alternative polling hours. The two most popular alternative polling times were 7am to 9pm and 8am to 9pm. A few respondents argued that polling hours should be reduced not lengthened: several suggested that 12 hours would give voters ample opportunity to cast their vote and argued that standard hours of poll should be fixed at 8am to 8pm, while a handful of respondents suggested 8am to 7pm.

4.7 The principal argument in favour of extending polling hours to 7am to 10pm was that such a change would further increase access to the democratic process by giving electors more time to cast their vote. One Member of Parliament argued for an extension of polling hours, explaining that many commuters, in his experience, were unable or unwilling to vote, having returned home very late in the evening on account of work commitments or transport difficulties. Extending the hours of poll by one hour could encourage such people to venture out to vote. Another respondent from the South West of England suggested that many commuters and agricultural workers might value being able to cast their vote earlier in the morning at local government elections.

4.8 However, many electoral administrators expressed concern about our proposal to align polling hours at 7am to 10pm for all UK elections. Below we present a summary of the principal concerns:

• It was argued by some that experience showed that very few voters actually cast their votes between 7–8am and 9–10pm at elections where this timetable operated. Extending local government polling hours would therefore bring little, if any, benefit to voters and would have little effect on turnout. Postal voting on demand has meant that those who may have previously preferred to vote during these hours – for example, commuters leaving for work early in the morning or returning late in the evening – can now apply for a postal vote up to six days before polling day. For those able to visit a polling station, most should be able to do so by 9pm.

• Concern was raised as to the implications that any lengthening of polling hours would have for the cost of running elections (in terms of recruiting staff and hiring halls) and for polling and counting staff who were required to work very long hours on election day: polling station staff already have to agree to a modification of their working arrangements under the European Working Time Directive. Longer hours could make the hiring of staff even more difficult and higher rates of pay may need to be offered as an incentive. Later polls could increase risks for staff working in areas where crime is a particular problem. Polling station staff who also work on counts may be less willing to do so, leading to further staffing difficulties. A standard 9pm close of poll would mean an earlier finish for staff, easier staff recruitment and greater cost effectiveness. Conversely, longer polling hours could make the administration of an election more difficult and more costly.
As highlighted in the previous section, one of the most popular objections to adopting standard polling hours of 7am to 10pm is that the hours of 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm do not attract sufficient voters in order to justify their inclusion in the hours of poll. Indeed, some respondents to our consultation paper suggested that such polling hours, which already apply for all national level elections in the UK, should be dispensed with altogether. In this section we examine some time of voting data in order to add weight to our argument that the polling hours of 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm do attract voters who, despite postal voting on demand, would not necessarily be able to cast their vote were polling hours reduced.

General election exit poll data

4.11 As highlighted in the previous section, one of the most popular objections to adopting standard polling hours of 7am to 10pm is that the hours of 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm do not attract sufficient voters in order to justify their inclusion in the hours of poll. Indeed, some respondents to our consultation paper suggested that such polling hours, which already apply for all national level elections in the UK, should be dispensed with altogether. In this section we examine some time of voting data in order to add weight to our argument that the polling hours of 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm do attract voters who, despite postal voting on demand, would not necessarily be able to cast their vote were polling hours reduced.

4.9 We recognise that a key area of concern for electoral administrators is the recruitment, payment and conditions of election staff. In our recently published report, *Funding electoral services*,13 we recommended that the Government should, in partnership with the relevant professional bodies and the Commission, undertake a review of the fees for the payment of Presiding Officers and Polling Clerks at national elections (including the issues involved in granting greater local flexibility in setting fees). We also recommended that local authorities should conduct an immediate review of expenditure in relation to electoral services, and that there should be a requirement on local authorities to submit to the Commission figures on annual expenditure in this respect. We regard this as an initial step towards establishing the true costs of running effective elections and registration services, and a means of identifying where any funding pressures exist.

4.10 We consider that any extension of polling hours must take place alongside reforms to the funding of electoral services, in order to ease any recruitment and/or financial difficulties that might be exacerbated by longer polling hours. The Commission is aware that elections staff work very long hours. For all national elections, however, polling staff are employed on the basis that the hours of poll are 7am to 10pm. As yet we have no evidence to suggest that staff would be unwilling to work these hours were they applied to all elections.

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13 This report can be downloaded at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/fundelectservs.cfm.

Table 3: Time of voting, 1992 and 1987 general elections

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<td>7am – 12noon</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>12noon – 5pm</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>5pm – 8pm</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>8pm – 10pm</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gallup

4.14 Table 4 presents time of voting data for the 1997 and 2001 general elections.

Table 4: Time of voting, 2001 and 1997 general elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7am – 11am</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11am – 3pm</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>3pm – 7pm</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>7pm – 10pm</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BBC/NOP exit poll

4.15 Butler and Kavanagh interpret the data in the following terms:

Electors who voted did so at approximately the same time of day as voters in 1997, but slightly earlier in the day than in elections before that. … If the times of voting given by the exit polls … are compared to the preceding elections, there has been a shift from early morning voting to late evening voting, which makes knocking up more difficult for the parties, as they cannot focus their resources on the few remaining non-voters as voting draws to a close. (p.223)

4.16 If there has indeed been a shift from early morning voting to late evening voting at recent elections, it would certainly not be appropriate to recommend that polling hours be shortened, to say 8am to 8pm, or 8am to 7pm, as recommended by a handful of respondents to our consultation paper. The Commission believes that some voters welcome the opportunity to cast their votes later in the evening and that the opportunity to do so should be enhanced not reduced.

Table 5: Hourly turnout figures, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>% voting 7am – 8am</th>
<th>% voting 9pm – 10pm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999 European (H&amp;F)</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>7.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 European (EASB)</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>7.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 GLA (H&amp;F)</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>N/A poll ended 9pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 GLA (EASB)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>N/A poll ended 9pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 Parliamentary (H&amp;F)</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 Parliamentary (EASB)</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>6.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Steve Miller, Electoral Services Manager, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham. H&F is the Hammersmith & Fulham Parliamentary constituency that makes up approximately 75% of the borough. The rest of the borough is part of the Ealing, Acton & Shepherd’s Bush (EASB) constituency – these figures only show stations in this borough and do not include any in Ealing.

4.17 In addition to exit poll data, the Commission has obtained some limited but valuable data from polling station log books. These polling stations were situated in an urban area, namely, the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham. Although we consider these hourly turnout figures to be valuable, we acknowledge that the situation may vary across the UK – for example, between cities, busy commuter towns and isolated rural areas.

4.18 Table 5 presents hourly turnout figures from the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham. The data cover the 1999 European, 2000 GLA and 2001 Parliamentary general elections and show the flow of voters for the periods 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm.

4.19 In general, the Hammersmith & Fulham figures suggest that voting during the last hour has been more popular than during the first, although at the 2001 general election more people voted between 7–8am than did between 9–10pm. Although the percentage voting during the hours of 7am to 8am and 9pm to 10pm is relatively small when compared with other periods of the day, the percentages are far from insignificant. We believe that the figures presented above demonstrate that a significant number of voters do value being able to vote early in the morning or late in the evening, and there is no guarantee...
that all these voters would turn out at other times of the day or use the postal voting option if the extended polling hours were not in operation.

**2002 electoral pilot schemes**

4.20 At the 2002 local elections, two local authorities – Wandsworth and Westminster – ran pilot schemes which involved opening polling stations for two extra hours. In both cases, traditional polling stations opened from 7am to 10pm, as opposed to the normal 8am to 9pm period for local government elections. In Wandsworth, 6,130 votes were cast during the extended polling hours, representing 10.5% of the total turnout. Of these, 47% were cast between 7 and 8am with the remaining 53% in the evening between 9 and 10pm. In Westminster, 2,696 voted during the extended hours – 48% (1,286) of these in the first hour, 52% (1,410) in the last hour.15

4.21 In our strategic report on the 2002 pilots, we stated that these extended voting hours did not appear to have any significant effect on overall turnout as compared to previous local elections. In Wandsworth, turnout fell from 39.3% to 29.7%, while in Westminster it went down from 32% to 27.37%. However, it is possible that turnout would have been even lower had the schemes not been applied.

4.22 While there is some doubt as to whether extended voting hours would have the effect of increasing turnout at local government elections, we believe that such a measure would make the process of voting more convenient for some. Postal voting on demand has done much to encourage access to the democratic process and the evidence to date suggests that this option is attractive to people who might previously have been ineligible to apply. Nevertheless, we do not accept that the increased availability of postal votes justifies either a shortening or continuation of present polling hours at local government or other elections.

4.23 Although time of voting patterns may vary across the country, the evidence we have suggests that a significant minority of electors do choose to cast their vote either early in the morning or late in the evening. Consequently, we believe that voters should be granted the opportunity to cast their vote in person at a polling station between the hours of 7–8am and 9–10pm at local as well as national elections.

The Commission recommends that polling hours for local government elections in England and Wales, and Greater London Authority elections, should be set at 7am to 10pm, so bringing them into line with the hours for Parliamentary general and other national elections. In order to maximise and maintain consistency across polling hours, we hope that the hours of 7am to 10pm will be adopted for Scottish local government and community council elections; community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales; and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

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5 Weekend voting, 
dies non and other issues

Each election timetable has provisions for disregarding certain days, termed dies non, in computing time. Elections can be held on any weekday except the dies non, although the convention has been to hold them on a Thursday.

Legal context
5.1 Certain days – termed dies non – are disregarded for the purposes of computing election timetables. For the purpose of calculating most UK election timetables, the following dies non apply:

- a Saturday or Sunday;

- Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday or bank holidays applicable in the various parts of the UK, as designated under the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971;

- a day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

Weekends as dies non
5.2 At present, the designation of Saturday and Saturday as dies non excludes their use as polling day. In the UK there is a long-established convention of holding elections on a Thursday. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in alternative voting methods and arrangements as part of the debate about making voting more accessible in order to increase turnout. The idea that weekend voting could have a positive effect on turnout has received some support in the academic literature, with one recent study showing that voting on a Sunday increases turnout by 6 to 7%. To date, however,

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16 Maundy Thursday is not a dies non for the purposes of computing the Scottish Parliament and local government election timetables.
17 At a local government election it will be those applicable in England and Wales or Scotland or Northern Ireland depending on the location of the Local Authority. At a Parliamentary by-election it will be those applicable in that part of the UK in which the constituency is located. At a Parliamentary general election it will be those applicable in any part of the UK. So, for example, St Patrick’s Day is a bank holiday in Northern Ireland and would not be a dies non at a district council election in England but would be a dies non at a Parliamentary general election – where the same timetable is applicable throughout the UK.
few electoral pilot schemes have tested weekend voting. At the May 2000 local elections, Watford experimented with voting on Saturday and Sunday instead of the normal Thursday. In the event, turnout fell to 26.99% from 36% at the previous year’s Borough Council elections.19

In Camden, an early voting pilot scheme at the 2002 local elections allowed electors to cast their vote over the weekend preceding the election on the following Thursday. A total of 3.5% of voters cast their vote at the weekend and the overall turnout fell from 33.4% in 1998 to 28.4%.20

5.3 The Government recently published a consultation paper inviting the submission of comments and views on the possibility of weekend voting.21 While the Representation of the People Act 2000 contains provision for suspending election rules (including dies non) within the context of local electoral pilot schemes, this does not apply to Parliamentary general, devolved or European elections. For these elections, or for non-pilot local elections, any change to allow voting at the weekend would require primary legislation.22

5.4 In our report on the 2002 local electoral pilot schemes, we stated that we believed there was a case for considering weekend voting at polling stations instead of the traditional Thursday so as to test voters’ preference.23 While we have acknowledged that voting spread over two or more days will undoubtedly increase the overall costs of running an election,24 we hope that any such trials will provide evidence as to whether weekend voting is effective in facilitating turnout. No trials of weekend voting took place at local elections in May 2003.

5.5 In our consultation paper on election timetables, we asked for views on whether provision should be made (under new timetable arrangements) to enable polling day to fall on a dies non, allowing for the possibility of weekend voting at any election without the need for further legislative change. In the remainder of this chapter we consider the arguments for and against making such a provision, drawing on our research and the responses received through consultation. We also examine other proposals and suggestions made by consultees with respect to the clarification of dies non provisions.

Support for change

5.6 Our analysis of the consultation responses received for this review showed that opinion was divided on whether adjustments should be made to the dies non provisions to allow polling day to fall on a Saturday or Sunday. Those who favoured the principle of weekend voting – either occurring on one or both of the relevant days – did so principally because they believed that such arrangements would provide greater flexibility for voters and potentially boost turnout. In contrast, those opposing weekend voting argued that it would be premature to proceed with weekend voting at any elections other than those involving electoral pilot schemes, on the grounds that the case for change had not yet been proven.

5.7 Further questions were raised as to the overall viability of weekend voting. An important issue mentioned by respondents, which we also highlighted in our consultation paper, related to religious observance and, in particular, the need to ensure that any poll would have to be over two days in order to accommodate those who could not, or would not wish to, vote on a Saturday or Sunday. Some consultees focused on the likely staffing and cost implications that polling over one or two days at the weekend could have. Several electoral administrators, for example, argued that they would experience extreme difficulty in persuading staff to work at weekends, while...
others stated that only very high rates of pay might persuade some to work. Either way, it was argued, weekend voting could have serious resource implications for electoral services teams. One Returning Officer pointed out that the safe storage of boxes overnight if polling took place on a Saturday and Sunday would be an additional logistical problem and expense.

5.8 Many electoral administrators argued that, even if sufficient polling staff could be found, availability of polling stations would be limited at the weekend: schools, for example, would have to opened specially, while churches and other religious premises would not necessarily be available on Saturdays and/or Sundays. A few respondents pointed out that many village and community halls, which were often used as polling stations, had block bookings at weekends for events such as weddings, which would further squeeze the supply of suitable polling stations. One electoral administrator argued that the prevalence of major sporting fixtures at the weekend could have a depressive effect on turnout.

5.9 In general, respondents felt that it would be premature at this stage to allow weekend voting at any elections other than those involving electoral pilot schemes and that much more evaluation was needed before making any new provisions regarding the redefinition of dies non. In our report on the 2002 electoral pilot schemes, Modernising elections, we recommended that there should be further experiments with weekend voting in place of Thursday voting before deciding whether to roll out the scheme. At a recent Westminster Hall debate, the Parliamentary Secretary in the Lord Chancellor’s Department, Yvette Cooper MP stated that she personally considered there to be a case for further trials ‘perhaps as part of a programme, and on a much larger scale than the Watford example’. Indeed, a statement made on 6 May 2003 setting out the Government’s response to consultation confirmed its intention to take forward further pilots of weekend voting.

5.10 The Commission believes that it would be inappropriate to roll out weekend voting before experiments had fully tested whether such arrangements worked in practice and could have a positive impact on levels of voter turnout.

The Commission recommends:
• encouragement for further experiments with weekend voting in place of Thursday voting;
• no change with respect to the dies non status of Saturday and Sunday at present;
• a more thorough assessment of the potential resource, practical and cultural issues that might arise were weekend voting to be introduced on a broader scale than at present.

Maundy Thursday and provisions for days of mourning

5.11 In relation to dies non, several respondents suggested that an opportunity should be taken to modernise these provisions by excluding Maundy Thursday from the definition of a dies non and clarifying provisions with respect to days appointed for mourning. Indeed, the Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 2002 amended the dies non provisions for Scottish Parliament elections by removing Maundy Thursday. Timetable arrangements for Scottish local government elections have also been amended along identical lines. However, the inclusion of Maundy Thursday as a dies non still applies for elections in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

5.12 On the subject of Maundy Thursday, a few electoral administrators argued that its inclusion as a dies non creates confusion for political parties, candidates and election agents and that it was difficult to explain why it was designated a ‘non-working’ day. A few respondents argued that its dies non status was archaic and should be excluded altogether.

26 Combination of local, European and Greater London Authority elections in 2004: response to consultation, Statement by The Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP, 6 May 2003.
5.13 One administrator explained that Maundy Thursday was originally included as a *dies non* as a result of central government staff being granted a half day’s privilege leave on that day, which meant that they would not necessarily be available for consultation by Acting Returning Officers. The rules regarding privilege leave for civil servants still apply and undoubtedly some civil servants do choose to take Maundy Thursday afternoon off. It has accordingly been pointed out to us that, were the rules changed so that Maundy Thursday were treated as any other working day in the election timetable, this could still mean that electoral administrators and others involved in the electoral process would be unable to obtain urgent advice on account of key civil service staff being absent. While we recognise that there is a risk of this happening, we believe this to be small. The risk is minimised further given that The Electoral Commission has statutory responsibility for providing advice and assistance to electoral administrators, political parties and others in a timely fashion, and the Commission does not regard Maundy Thursday as a non-working day.

5.14 A key theme of our review is timetable consistency. In chapters two and three we set out the case for a uniform timetable that could be applied to all elections in the UK. Clearly, uniform *dies non* provisions will be crucial to any consistent timetable for UK elections.

The Commission recommends that Maundy Thursday be removed from the *dies non* provisions with respect to the following elections and related by-elections:

- Parliamentary general;
- European Parliament;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Greater London Authority;
- Local Government (England and Wales);
- Local Government (Northern Ireland);

In order to maximise and maintain consistency of election timetable computation, we believe that Maundy Thursday should also be removed from the *dies non* provisions relating to community, parish and mayoral elections in England and Wales, and for any newly created institutions, such as directly elected regional assemblies.

5.15 Our consultation paper also asked whether there is a case for clarifying provisions with respect to days of mourning. Respondents generally agreed that there was indeed a case for clarifying these provisions. As one electoral administrator from southern England explained: ‘I have met no-one who understands the implications at present’. Another felt that this part of the law was redundant and should be removed from electoral law altogether.

5.16 Rule 2 of Schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1983 provides for days of mourning and thanksgiving to be disregarded for the purposes of computing the Parliamentary general election timetable. Days of mourning and thanksgiving are not defined by the RPA 1983 or elsewhere in legislation, and there is very little precedent to follow in this area. In seeking to anticipate what would constitute a day of mourning or thanksgiving, and how the law would be applied in the
event of such a day falling within an election period, we are mindful of the fact that dies non are so designated because they are days on which local authority staff are not expected to work.

5.17 On this basis, it seems reasonable to assume that a day of mourning or thanksgiving is a day specifically designated for public observance, rather than, for example, any period of court mourning observed by the Royal Family. In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that, should such a day fall on a day within the election period which is already excluded (for example, a Saturday or Sunday), no extension of the election timetable would be necessary. However, if a designated day of mourning or thanksgiving falls on a working day within the election timetable, it seems clear that this day should be disregarded and the election timetable extended accordingly.

5.18 Section 20 of the RPA 1985 provides for a ‘freezing’ of the election timetable for 14 calendar days following the demise of the Crown, if this occurs at any time after the proclamation is given and before the date of the poll. We understand that this 14-day period starts automatically on the announcement of the death. If the outcome of the postponement is that timetable proceedings fall on a dies non as defined by the RPA 1983, then proceedings will fall on the following day.

5.19 In the event of the demise of the Crown, it is likely that a day or days of mourning would be designated. If a day of mourning were to fall within the 14 calendar days during which the election timetable is frozen, we assume that no additional lengthening of the timetable would be necessary, but that if a day of mourning were to fall after the 14-day period the timetable would be extended.

5.20 The assessment above reflects the Commission’s understanding of the legislation. However, the Commission cannot offer an authoritative interpretation of the law. The Commission does not believe that clarifying the existing statutory provisions with respect to days of mourning and thanksgiving is a pressing issue. Nevertheless, there is clearly some ambiguity surrounding these provisions.

The Commission recommends that the Government considers the practicability of defining in legislation days of public thanksgiving and mourning, with the aim of facilitating levels of understanding about which events might impact on the computation of election timetables.
6 The future of election timetables

We look forward to the adoption of a consistent approach to the timetabling of all types of election. Such a system will have the effect of reducing confusion among voters, political parties, candidates and election agents. We also believe that introducing a consistent timetable would constitute an important step in the development of a more efficient, effective and practical system of electoral administration.

6.1 This review arose from the Commission’s statutory evaluation of the administration of the 2001 general election and is part of a wider programme of modernising reviews. Our aim throughout this report has been to set out a series of recommendations that we believe will modernise election timetables.

Financial implications

6.2 Many of the changes proposed in this report are directed at improving the efficient and effective administration of the electoral process and should not in themselves give rise to any new financial burdens. Equally, they are unlikely to produce savings on any noticeable scale. There is, however, one exception. The adoption of extended polling hours for local elections (and other elections where shorter hours currently apply) will have financial implications. We acknowledged earlier in this report that a key area of concern for electoral administrators was the recruitment, payment and conditions of election staff. Fees for the payment of Presiding Officers, Polling Clerks and count staff at local elections are primarily a matter of local discretion for the Returning Officer. However, it will be important that funding allocated locally for election fees is sufficient to address not only the additional two hours’ work, but to ensure that those who might be discouraged from putting themselves forward for election duties because of the longer hours are incentivised to retain their involvement. This increased allocation of funds at local level may in turn require an increase in the grant given by central government to local authorities for the performance of local election management.

6.3 In our recently published report, Funding electoral services,27 we recommended that local authorities should conduct an immediate review of expenditure in relation to electoral services, and that new requirements should be introduced to require reporting of electoral services expenditure to the Commission as an initial step towards establishing the true costs of running effective elections and registration services. Without this baseline data, it is

27 This report can be downloaded at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/fundelectservs.cfm.
difficult to assess the likely cost of extending polling station hours. However, we are clear that any extension of polling hours must take place alongside reforms to the funding of electoral services in order to ease any recruitment and/or financial difficulties which might be exacerbated by longer polling hours.

Implementation

6.4 In this report we have set out our recommendations for achieving uniformity across election timetables. The Commission has been heartened by the large number of responses to our consultation which have broadly confirmed our view that reforms to election timetables are necessary and long overdue. We are aware that the process of aligning timetables will involve amendments to election rules and different sections of the Representation of the People Acts. In short, the process will entail a major drafting exercise. However, we believe that the outcome will be a timetable that is clear and accessible to all stakeholders and one that is easily adjusted when necessary. We intend to work closely with electoral administrators and the Government in the process of implementing any changes to election timetables that flow from our review.
Appendix 1
Respondents to our consultation paper

Respondents to the consultation paper are listed below. Copies of individual responses are available to view at the Commission’s offices on request, except in those instances where respondents requested confidentiality. Local authorities’ responses came variously from councillors, electoral administrators, Chief Executives, Returning Officers or as a ‘corporate’ response.

Local authorities
Adur District Council
Amber Valley Borough Council
Aylesbury Vale District Council
Babergh District Council
Basildon District Council
Bedford Borough Council
Birmingham City Council
Blaenau Gwent County Council
Bourne Valley District Council
Borough of Poole Council
Brentwood Borough Council
Broadland District Council
Bromsgrove District Council
Burnley Borough Council
City and County of Swansea
City of Edinburgh Council
City of Gloucester Council
Clackmannanshire Council
Colchester Borough Council
Cornwall County Council
Cotswold District Council
Coventry City Council
Dacorum Borough Council
Daventry District Council
Dundee City Council
East Hampshire District Council
East Renfrewshire Council
Essex County Council
Exeter City Council
Flintshire County Council
Gateshead Council
Glasgow City Council
Gosport Borough Council
Hampshire County Council
Hart District Council
Hastings Borough Council
Hull City Council
Kettering Borough Council
Liverpool City Council
London Borough of Camden
London Borough of Enfield
London Borough of Hackney
London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham
London Borough of Islington
London Borough of Merton
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
London Borough of Sutton
London Borough of Wandsworth
Mid Sussex District Council
Middlesbrough Council
New Forest District Council
Newcastle City Council
Newport City Council
Norfolk County Council
North East Derbyshire District Council
North East Lincolnshire Council
North Somerset Council
North Tyneside Council
North West Leicestershire District Council
Nottingham City Council
Pendle Borough Council
Perth and Kinross Council
Peterborough City Council
Preston City Council
Purbeck District Council
Runnymede Borough Council
Rushmoor Borough Council
Sevenoaks District Council
Sheffield City Council
South Derbyshire District Council
South Lanarkshire Council
Staffordshire County Council
St Albans District Council
Stirling Council
Stoke on Trent City Council
Stratford District Council
Three Rivers District Council
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Tynedale District Council
Wellingborough Borough Council
West Berkshire District Council
West Dumbartonshire Council
West Lancashire District Council
West Lindsey District Council
Weymouth & Portland Borough Council
Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council
Wiltshire County Council
Worthing Borough Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Wyre Borough Council

Other organisations
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Association of Electoral Administrators
Association of Electoral Administrators Wales Branch
Camden Conservatives
Conservative Party
Electoral Office for Northern Ireland
Electoral Reform Society
Green Party of England and Wales
Halstead Residents’ Association
Independent Britwellian Residents
Labour Party
Liberal Democrats
Local Government Association
Molesey Residents Association
National Association of Local Councils
Newham Independents Association
Official Monster Raving Loony Party
Pensiynwyr Canolbarth a Gorllewin Cymru
(Mid and West Wales Pensioners)
Populist Party
Rainham Residents’ Association
Real Democracy Party
Royal Mail
Runcorn Labour Councillors Group
Runnymede Independent Residents’ Group
Scottish Assessors’ Association
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
St Albans District Council Labour Group
Ulster Unionist Party
Wessex Regionalists
West Sussex Electoral Services Working Party

Individuals
David Amess MP
Louise Baldock
Mark Francois MP
Cheryl Gillan MP
Vince Harrison
Andrew Lansley CBE MP
Chris Mead
Jeff Muir
Bill O’Brien MP
Andrew Pelling GLA
Ken Purchase MP
Rt Hon Sir David Steel KBE MSP
Daniel Summers
Matthew Taylor MP
We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.