



Weekend voting

Standard Note: SN/PC/04469

Last updated: 25 June 2008

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The Government published a consultation paper on weekend voting on 24 June 2008. The paper seeks views on whether voting could be made more convenient by changing the day of the week on which elections are held. The results of the consultation will be fed into a Citizens' Summit which will be held later in 2008 and which will consider the physical and non-physical barriers to voting. The Summit will make a recommendation to the Government as to whether election day should be moved to the weekend.

This Note also looks at earlier proposals to move polling day to the weekend and at electoral pilot schemes held at local elections where electors have been able to vote at the weekend preceding the election or, in one instance, at the weekend instead of on the Thursday.

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A. Background

There is no statutory requirement for parliamentary elections to be held on Thursdays; they could be held on any weekday except for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Good Friday, a bank holiday or any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning. Elections cannot take place on Saturday or Sunday as these days are *dies non*, i.e. must be disregarded for the purposes of the electoral timetable under the Parliamentary Election Rules in the *Representation of the People Act 1983*:

Computation of time

2 (1) In computing any period of time for the purposes of the timetable –

- (a) a Saturday or Sunday,
- (b) a Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday or a bank holiday, or
- (c) a day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning,

shall be disregarded, and any such day shall not be treated as a day for the purpose of any proceedings up to the completion of the poll nor shall the returning officer be obliged to proceed with the counting of the votes on such a day.¹

The *Electoral Administration Act 2006* removed Maundy Thursday from the list of days that are to be disregarded for the purposes of the electoral timetable.

The holding of polls on Thursdays has become an election convention. Since 1935 every general election has been held on a Thursday. Before the *Representation of the People Act 1918* elections were held over a period of a fortnight or more and the first time a general election was held on a single day it was held on a Saturday, 14 December 1918. In 1922 and 1924 the general elections were held on Wednesdays and in 1931 the general election was held on a Tuesday.

Local elections in England and Wales are required to be held on the first Thursday in May, or such other day as is fixed by the Secretary of State by order, under the provisions of section 37 of the *Representation of the People Act 1983*. However, a new clause introduced by ministers at committee stage during the passage of the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act Bill 2006-07* will empower the Secretary of State (and Assembly Government ministers in relation to Wales) to move the day of local elections to the same day as that of European Parliament elections when the two fall in the same year. The Bill received Royal Assent on 30 October 2007.

The Electoral Commission published a consultation paper in 2003 on election timetables and included in this a short review of recent proposals to move polling day to the weekend.² In September 1991 the all-party Hansard Society Commission on Election Campaigns had

¹ Schedule 1 of the *Representation of the People Act 1983*

² *Election timetables in the UK: a consultation paper*, Electoral Commission, 2003. Available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/ElecTimetableconsFINALwithcover_7735-6805__E__N__S__W__.pdf

published a report entitled *Agenda for Change*. The Electoral Commission noted in its consultation paper that:

Among the issues discussed in the report (and the one relevant to election timetables) was that of current polling day arrangements and whether, in particular, provision should be made to allow voting at weekends. The report referred to a submission made by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) that supported the switching of polling day to Sunday and to the fact that there was some public backing for weekend voting. While noting the arguments for switching polling day, and the fact that most other European democracies voted at the weekend, the Hansard Society Commission chose not to make any recommendation on the matter.

In 1993 the Labour Party's review of electoral systems chaired by Lord Plant considered a number of issues relating to the timing of elections:

Like the Hansard Society Commission report, the Working Party examined whether electors would benefit if elections were to be held on days other than a Thursday (general elections have been held on a Thursday since 1935) and also over a longer period. The Working Party argued for the introduction of early voting for a period of eight days, ending 48 hours prior to the poll, together with a change to statutory election days and hours so that voting would take place on Saturday from 8am to 6pm and Sunday from 8am to 1pm.³

After the 1997 general election the Home Affairs Select Committee examined electoral law and administration as one of its first full inquiries. The Committee noted that there was no statutory requirement for elections to be held on a Thursday and suggested that there should be experiments with weekend voting to see if such arrangements boosted turnout.

The Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures, chaired by George Howarth MP, reported in 1999 and recommended that new arrangements for polling day should be tested in pilot schemes at local elections. The working party had used its analysis of responses from around 500 local authorities and others to the DETR consultation document "Local Democracy and Community Leadership" in developing a list of innovative reforms of voting practice which the working party believed might reasonably be introduced through pilot schemes. There were three broad categories: when to vote, where to vote and how to vote. The working party's report set out the suggestions for changes to when polling should take place:

- changing polling hours to allow variations around the opening and closing of the poll
- moving polling to an alternative weekday or weekend day or allowing voting over more than one day
- opening some polling stations in the days immediately before polling day itself to
- allow voters to cast their votes early

³ Ibid

3.1.8 Pilot schemes would need to take account of the implications for strict religious observers of most faiths of any move away from Thursday voting. This suggests that proposals for weekend voting would need to consider opening the polls on more than one day. There are also potentially implications for the selection of polling place locations: as an example, voting over more than one day or at weekends could increase the difficulty of obtaining suitable accommodation, but an alternative polling day might reduce the disruption to education when school accommodation is used for voting. Early voting in selected polling stations would increase the opportunity for electors to vote at a more convenient time, although not necessarily location, but could also provide much easier access for disabled voters than their traditional polling station. Early voting would also require close control over the register to prevent double voting using different polling stations and any schemes would need to consider the implications for exit polling and security of ballot papers.⁴

B. The Representation of the People Act 2000

The *Representation of the People Act 2000* made provision for electoral pilot schemes to take place. The Act allowed the Secretary of State to make Orders to allow pilot schemes 'in relation to those elections as he considers appropriate (which may include provision modifying or disapplying any enactment).'⁵ The *dies non* provisions in the electoral timetable could therefore be disappplied for schemes which piloted early or weekend polling.

The Home Office proposed that the first pilots should take place at the local elections in May 2000 and a circular called for applications to be submitted by 17 January 2000, with outcomes of the applications to be known by 14 February 2000.⁶ A total of 32 authorities ran 38 pilot schemes in May 2000. Mike O'Brien, the Minister of State for the Home Office, gave a list of the schemes on 21 March 2000 in response to a PQ.⁷ There were several pilots of early voting but Watford was the only local authority to pilot weekend voting as well as a mobile polling facility, early voting and a freepost facility. An evaluation of the pilot schemes undertaken in Watford in 2000 was carried out by Steven Lake on behalf of the Association of Electoral Administrators.⁸

The timetable for the election in Watford commenced two days later than it would normally have started for the 4 May election to allow for polling to be held on Saturday and Sunday 6 and 7 May 2000. Lake noted in his evaluation that six polling station locations had to be changed because of difficulties in securing the normal stations for weekend use and that this was unpopular with some voters who had to travel further to the new polling stations they had been assigned. Electors were surveyed about the change to weekend voting and Lake reported the results:

Although the majority of electors normally voted, there were a number for whom weekend voting afforded an opportunity to vote in person that was not otherwise available. There were some electors who supported Saturday voting, but objected to

⁴ *Final Report of the Working Party on Electoral Procedures*. Chaired by George Howarth. Home Office, 1999. Available at <http://www.dca.gov.uk/elections/reports/procs/pdf/wpep1.pdf>

⁵ s10, *Representation of the People Act 2000*

⁶ RPA Circular 22 November 1999

⁷ HC Deb 21 March 2000 c486W

⁸ *Borough of Watford: evaluation of election pilot schemes 2000* by Steven Lake on behalf of the Association of Electoral Administrators. Available at <http://www.dca.gov.uk/elections/evalps0502/watford.pdf>

the polling being held on the Sunday. Nearly all Saturday voters supported polling being held over two days, and many preferred the option of the normal Thursday together with the subsequent Saturday. The Sunday voters generally supported weekend voting, and the issue of which days did not arise. For many voters, the change of days resulted in them forgetting that the election was being held. The effect of all other ordinary elections in England being held on the preceding Thursday may have contributed to this. The Borough Council continued to provide publicity throughout the two days with an advertising lorry being driven round the area reminding electors of weekend voting.

For nearly all electors, the issue of convenience to voters was important. There was widespread support for the Council's initiative of making voting as easy as possible. Where electors supported the retention of weekend voting, they also expressed the view that the early voting opportunity should be retained to allow those who were away at the weekend to be able to vote.⁹

Although there were four pilot schemes the overall turnout for the election was only 26.99%.¹⁰

C. ODPM consultation paper on combining elections

On 28 October 2002 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published a consultation paper, *Combining the elections of English local authorities, the Greater London Authority and the European parliamentary elections in 2004*. This was mainly concerned with merging the dates of these elections but the consultation paper called for views on weekend voting and made the following observations:

29. Another means of making it more convenient for people to turn out to vote might be to hold elections at weekends, and we would be interested to know of consultees' views on this proposal. Our programme of innovative voting methods mentioned above has looked at some possible ways of making voting more convenient, such as extending the opening hours of polling stations. In Camden, in the local elections in 2002, voting was made available in the weekend before the usual election day. In this experiment, according to the evaluation undertaken by the Electoral Commission only 1.1% of the 28.4% who voted did so during the early voting period. This may have been a result of the fact that the actual voting day remained on the following Thursday, and media publicity nationally would have highlighted this as the day on which voting took place generally. The Electoral Commission, in their evaluation, did nevertheless say that we should test voters' preference for voting at weekends instead of the traditional Thursday.

30. We agree with the Electoral Commission that weekend voting should be tested, in view of the potential benefits:

- since most people have more leisure time at the weekend, electors would have more opportunity to come out and vote at an election;

⁹ Ibid, p12

¹⁰ Ibid, p19

- for the election to the European Parliament, it would mean we held our elections, for at least one day, on the same day as most other Member States.

31. The Government has previously made clear that if weekend voting for any election 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 for religious observance of members of the Jewish and Christian communities, or of any other group which might be affected who could not, or would not wish to, vote on a Saturday or a Sunday respectively.

32. If we were to proceed on this basis there would of course be significant consequences including:

- possible practical difficulties in recruiting staff for two days rather than one, and in finding suitable accommodation;
- higher costs from weekend staffing;
- without first conducting pilots it would be difficult to know whether the benefits of a higher turnout which could result from weekend voting would be sufficient to outweigh the extra costs.
- changes to the primary legislation governing European Parliamentary elections, as well as to local elections legislation, would be required.

33. We welcome views on this option but recognising the practical difficulties in moving to a nationwide weekend election by 2004 without further pilots, the Government is currently minded to hold these on Thursday 10 June. We would nevertheless welcome comments on the possibility of weekend voting.

D. Electoral pilot schemes 2002 - 2006

In August 2002 the Electoral Commission published an evaluation report on the electoral pilot schemes which had been carried out at the local elections on 2 May 2002, including the pilot scheme in Camden referred to in the ODPM consultation paper (see above) when electors were able to vote the weekend before polling day.¹¹ The Commission concluded that

...while extended hours and 'early voting' did not appear to have any significant effect on overall turnout, they certainly made the process of voting more convenient for some. Many early voters expressed appreciation at being given the opportunity to vote early. Some preferred it to the alternative of a postal vote if their attendance on polling day itself were difficult or impossible. Nevertheless, the Commission does not believe that 'early voting' on the Camden model increases turnout or can be justified in terms of cost and effort, especially given the availability of postal votes on demand. We do think there is a case for considering weekend voting at polling stations (or voting over several days, say Thursday – Sunday) instead of the traditional Thursday polling so as to test voters' preference. Alternatively, this option could be tested initially by surveying electors' views. Voting spread over two or three full days,

¹¹ *Modernising elections: a strategic evaluation of the 2002 electoral pilot schemes*. Electoral Commission, August 2002. Available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/Modernising_elections_6574-6170_E_N_S_W_.pdf

including weekend pay rates for election staff, would certainly increase overall costs.¹²

The Electoral Commission published a report on election timetables following a consultation exercise in 2003 and recommended that there should be further experiments with weekend voting before '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.'¹³

There were further electoral pilot schemes in 2003 and the Electoral Commission published an evaluation of these.¹⁴ The Commission made the following comments on the pilots which experimented with changes to the day of polling:

Although all of the all-postal pilot schemes had delivery points that were open at different times in the run up to election day, and postal voters were able to post their votes in at any time, just two pilots specifically tested new voting hours at 'traditional' and non-'traditional' polling stations. Although neither of these resulted in a significant increase in turnout, feedback suggested that the convenience was positively received by voters who found the extended hours helpful and convenient. In addition, North Kesteven tested a form of mobile polling – taking the ballot box to nursing homes.

7.5 The Windsor & Maidenhead pilot scheme was intended to enable voters to vote at a location and time more convenient to them. Electors were able to vote on 29 and 30 April at a number of different locations including railway stations (to attract commuters) and supermarkets. Opening times at the railway stations and the supermarkets varied in order to address key times of demand. For example, the railway station locations were open from 7–10am and then between 5.30–8pm, whereas the supermarket locations were open at various times throughout the day. Overall turnout was 35%, up 2% since the last local elections in 2000 and there was also a significant increase in the take-up of postal voting in the Borough at these elections. A total of 5.15% of the turnout were votes cast at the early voting available on 29 and 30 April; however, as with similar pilots in previous years, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these are existing voters or people who otherwise would not have voted.

The Commission concluded that authorities should 'continue to pilot new days and places for polling, but that any such application must include fully costed promotion plans.'

In 2006 10 local authorities held pilot schemes providing early voting facilities during the weeks before polling day on 4 May 2006; some of these schemes were focused on specific groups of electors such as service personnel, while other schemes made early voting available to all electors. The Electoral Commission evaluated the pilots and found that public awareness of the early voting schemes was low and that the schemes had had only limited

¹² Ibid, p56

¹³ *Election timetables in the UK: report and recommendations*. Electoral Commission, June 2003. Available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/Timetables_10051-7977__E__N__S__W__.pdf

¹⁴ *The shape of elections to come*, Electoral Commission, 2003. Available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/The_shape_of_elections_to_come_final_10316-8346__E__N__S__W__.pdf

positive success in increasing turnout. Local surveys suggested that those who voted early would have voted on polling day in any case.¹⁵

E. Pilot schemes for early voting facilities in 2007

In May 2007 5 local authorities ran pilot schemes for early voting facilities during the two weeks before polling day on 3 May 2007. The Electoral Commission evaluated the 2007 pilots and published its findings in August 2007.¹⁶ The Commission also published a summary of its findings on the advance voting pilot schemes (i.e. paper based voting at polling stations in advance of polling day).¹⁷ Four of the local authorities which provided early voting facilities enabled electors to vote at a weekend. In its general summary the Commission reported that electors generally welcomed the increased convenience of advance voting but that the use of the advance voting facilities in the pilots was largely confined to those already predisposed to vote and there was no significant impact on turnout. In the light of this the Commission said there was 'little new learning to take from the piloting of advance voting this year...we see little value in continuing to pilot advance voting and believe available resources should be targeted elsewhere in order to bring about further improvements in other areas of the electoral process.'¹⁸ The Commission added that it considered that 'there is now a sufficient knowledge and evidence base that would enable the Government to reach a decision as part of its wider electoral modernisation strategy on whether advance voting should be mandatory, optional or discontinued.'¹⁹

The notes which follow describe the pilot schemes for advance voting which took place in May 2007:

Bedford Borough Council provided an early voting facility at the Civic Theatre. This enabled electors to vote on Friday 27 April and Saturday 28 April (from 9am to 6pm) in advance of polling day on Thursday 3 May 2007. In its evaluation of the pilot the Commission noted:

Feedback on the advance voting aspect of the pilot was positive from those who made use of the facility, with 100% of the 68 advance voters polled saying it should be available at all elections. No advance voter took up the opportunity to vote who had not already planned to do so, despite the Council's efforts to draw people in on the day, including the unusual step of having the Town Crier announce the availability of advance voting.²⁰

The Commission also assessed the impact advance voting had on turnout and found that 'opinion research suggests that advance voting was largely intentional and no one voted opportunistically. Therefore the impact on turnout was negligible.'²¹ However 'two in five

¹⁵ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/FindingsEarlyVoting_22985-17172__E__N__S__W__.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/pilotsmay2007.cfm>

¹⁷ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20115>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20099>

²¹ Ibid

people surveyed by the Council said they were likely to use an advance voting location in future if it were provided.¹²²

Broxbourne Borough Council ran a pilot scheme to provide 'out of ward' advance voting facilities allowing electors to vote in person at the Council's main offices and in two of its one-stop shops before polling day.

These advance voting stations, designed to replicate the polling station experience, would enable electors to vote from Wednesday 25 to Saturday 28 April and from Monday 30 April to Wednesday 2 May. The stations were open from 9am to 5pm on all days except on Saturday 28 April, when the operational hours were from 9am to 1pm.²³

In its evaluation of the pilot scheme the Electoral Commission found that:

5.2 The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors. Advance voting gave electors more opportunity to cast their votes; just under 7% of those who voted at the May 2007 elections used the advance voting stations. The pilot also improved convenience for electors, allowing them to vote in person at a wider range of times and locations.²⁴

Broxbourne had run a similar pilot for advance voting in 2006 and the Commission found that the number of advance voters increased in 2007:

5.5 The pilot scheme appears to have had some limited impact on turnout. Overall turnout for the May 2007 elections in Broxbourne was 31.3%. While this was 2.5 percentage points less than in 2006, the number of advance voters ran against the overall voting trend, recording a 75% increase over the previous year. As in 2006, there is some limited evidence to suggest that a minority (15% of those surveyed) of those using advance voting stations would not have voted had the pilot scheme not been taking place.²⁵

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council piloted advance voting at one town centre location from 23 April to 2 May 2007. The single advance voting station was at the civic centre and was open at the following times:

- Monday 23 April to Friday 27 April, 9am to 5pm
- Saturday 28 April, 9am to 12 noon
- Monday 30 April and Tuesday 1 May, 9am to 5pm
- Wednesday 2 May, 9am to 12 noon²⁶

The Electoral Commission concluded in its evaluation report that:

The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors. Advance voting gave electors more opportunity to cast their votes, improving

²² Ibid

²³ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20101>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20103>

convenience by enabling them to vote in person before polling day. However, while the feedback from advance voters was positive, they were a small minority among the electorate as a whole, with only 286 voters (0.5% of turnout, 0.2% of the total electorate) using this facility...

The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout. As noted above, advance voters comprised 0.5% of overall turnout. Given that opinion research suggests that the majority of advance voters (74%) were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that the pilot has had a significant impact.²⁷

Sheffield City Council ran a pilot which provided advance voting in a city centre location for a period of four days prior to the elections on 3 May 2007.

The Electoral Commission found that:

Given the low number of people who used advance voting, it appears to have had a minimal positive impact on turnout. As previously noted, 909 voters made use of the advance voting facility in the Town Hall, which is only 0.69% of those who voted. Many, although not all, of those who used the advance voting station commented to Commission observers that they would have voted anyway on 3 May, had the advance voting station not been available to them. While electors living in wards relatively close to the city centre were more likely than average to make use of the opportunity, the highest number of advance voters as a percentage of turnout in a single ward contest was still only 1.28%.²⁸

Sunderland City Council piloted a series of innovations, including advance voting in three library locations in the week prior to the elections:

In 2006, the Council had piloted advance voting at a single location (Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre) as part of a joint pilot with three other Tyne and Wear local authorities. For 2007, the Council proposed extending the 2006 pilot by increasing the number of locations with advance voting stations to three. Two additional stations were provided for the other key settlements in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton-le-Spring. In 2006, very few electors from these areas used the advance voting station at Sunderland City Library. These areas were therefore chosen to provide electors living in those areas with a similar opportunity to those living in Sunderland city itself...

Each of these advance voting stations was open on the following dates and times, which are the same as those for last year's pilot scheme, with the exception that no stations were open on Saturday this year:

- Monday 23 April to Friday 27 April, 9am to 5pm
- Monday 30 April and Tuesday 1 May, 9am to 5pm
- Wednesday 2 May, 9am to 12 noon²⁹

The Electoral Commission concluded that:

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20105>

²⁹ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20109>

5.2 The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors. The advance voting stations allowed those who did not apply for a postal vote and who would be unable to vote on polling day the opportunity to cast their vote. This clearly facilitates voting for those people who would otherwise be automatically disenfranchised. A greater number of voters in Washington and Houghton-le-Spring than in 2006 used advance voting stations – in 2006 they would have had to travel to Sunderland, whereas this year there were also stations in these towns.

5.3 The pilot scheme had no impact on the capacity of electors to make an informed choice and did not affect the counting of votes.

5.4 The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout. Some 1.6% of voters took advantage of the advance voting stations in Sunderland. Given that opinion research found that 86% of advance voters surveyed stated that they were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that advance voting has had a significant impact on overall turnout.³⁰

F. Proposals in *The Governance of Britain* Green Paper

The Government published *The Governance of Britain* on 3 July 2007.³¹ In the Green Paper the Government announced that it wanted to consider further measures to make voting more convenient and would consult local authorities about the merits of moving polling day for general and/or local elections from Thursday to the weekend:

Election Day

149. In a modern world, where people are leading busier lives and rightly expect convenience and a range of choice in how they access services from both public and private sector, voting needs to be convenient. In research conducted by MORI for the Electoral Commission in 2001, 21 per cent of non-voters said 'I couldn't get to the polling station because it was too inconvenient'. Female voters are more likely to give this reason, perhaps because they most often have to juggle work and childcare commitments alongside voting.

150. The Government has extended the use of postal voting with appropriate safeguards and continues to pilot a range of measures to make voting more convenient. As part of the electoral modernisation programme the Government has piloted advance voting at the weekend. However, under current legislation advance voting can only be in addition to the normal polling day. In the longer term, the Government is investigating the potential benefits of remote electronic voting (using the internet and telephone systems), taking advantage of developing communications technologies to provide increased flexibility and choice in the way people vote.

151. The Government wishes to consider further measures to make voting more convenient and therefore proposes to examine the case for moving the voting to the weekend for both general and, potentially, local elections. The last time local

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ *The Governance of Britain*, Cm 7170, July 2007

authorities were comprehensively surveyed in 2002, 57 per cent were in favour of pilots testing the effect of weekend voting on turnout.

152. Holding general elections on a working weekday puts the UK in a minority among Western democracies. While the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, the US and Canada have elections on weekdays, the great majority of other European countries hold elections either at the weekend or on a public holiday.

153. Every general election in England since 1945 has taken place on a Thursday, but the statutory requirement is only that a general election must be held on a week day. 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, December 14th 1918. Local elections are now required by law to be held on a Thursday but for a time elections to certain Urban District Councils were held on Saturdays.

154. The Government will therefore consult 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. Moving to weekends for either general or local elections would require legislation. The consultation will take into account the needs of religious groups, to ensure that those with religious objections to voting on a Saturday or Sunday have an opportunity to vote in a way that is consistent with their beliefs. It will also consider whether weekend voting would be more costly than the current arrangements or if there might be a negative impact on turnout for local elections. This might be a particular issue if local and general elections were held close together but on separate days. These proposals would not affect elections to the devolved legislatures.³²

G. Consultation Paper on weekend voting

The Government published a consultation paper on weekend voting on 24 June 2008.³³ Announcing the publication of the consultation paper, Michael Wills, the Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice, said:

Decisions are made by those who vote. The government wants to make it easier for people to turn up to vote. As part of this process, we want to look at different options for the day on which elections take place.

The reason elections are traditionally held on Thursdays is obscure. We should not be afraid to try a new voting day that fits in better with people's busy lives, while also recognising the constraints of money and belief.

The consultation debates moving the day of elections for general, local and European elections from Thursdays to the weekend and considers:

- whether changing election day to the weekend, and other measures to increase convenience, encourage non-voters to vote
- the practical issues, including the cost, of a move to weekend voting

³² Ibid, p45-6

³³ Election Day: weekend voting. Consultation Paper CP 13/08. Ministry of Justice, June 2008, Cm 7334. Available at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/cp1308.pdf>

- religious concerns
- whether the change of day would affect the security of elections
- the relationship between postal and online voting and turnout
- whether other ways of voting (for instance - remote, postal, internet and advance voting) are acceptable where weekend voting is difficult for religious or other reasons
- the benefits and drawbacks of online voting
- other ways of increasing the legitimacy of elections³⁴

Michael Wills added further information about the Citizens' Summit in a Written Ministerial Statement:

I also intend that the summit should discuss more widely 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 the health of our democracy that we better understand the reasons for this, and what we can do to reverse the trend of falling turnout.

The consultation process on Election Day is an opportunity for a wide debate about how the democratic process can be shaped to the needs and preferences of citizens. But, whatever changes are made, we also need to ensure that the integrity of the electoral process is protected and enhanced.³⁵

The consultation paper sets out the current arrangements for holding different elections across the UK and notes that 'the great majority of other European countries hold election days either at the weekend or on a public holiday.'³⁶ The arguments for and against changing election day from a Thursday to a weekend day are also given, including the suggestion that voting at the weekend would be more convenient for voters and that it might have the potential to increase turnout. The consultation paper acknowledges that as Saturday and Sunday are days of religious observance this could raise difficulties for some voters. The paper calls for the views of electoral administrators on the resource issues related to a change to weekend voting and points out at the beginning of the paper that

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

³⁴ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease240608a.htm>

³⁵ HC Deb 24 June 2008 c9WS

³⁶ Election Day: weekend voting. Consultation Paper CP 13/08. Ministry of Justice, June 2008, Cm 7334, para 33

impact of any new burdens on local authorities would need to be funded appropriately.³⁷

The consultation period closes on 26 September 2008.

³⁷ Ibid, para 11