

# Elections



**Voters want bite-sized and easy-to-access information.**

## **The first step**

Registration is the first step on the journey to voting. It's important for us to do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. We must also continue our outreach and engagement activities to support citizens with registering to vote.

## **The ticking time bomb**

Elections are an area of growth. The number and complexity of elections are increasing. Changes such as Individual Electoral Administration have created extra pressures. This means that it's challenging for councils to run elections and it's difficult to maintain numbers on the electoral register. Without more support or better ways of doing things, the situation is unsustainable.

## **Standing for something**

Voters are motivated by having a competitive choice of candidates and by having a sense that your vote will count for something. Our citizens told us that it's important to get the best people into the council. There is strong public demand for better information on candidates, especially about "where they stand". We need to make sure that citizens can easily find accurate, timely, trustworthy, relevant information that is based around their needs.

## **Local elections matter**

Local government touches every aspect of our day-to-day lives, and yet most people do not see local elections as important. Citizens have greater trust in local politicians than in national government, but we don't see this reflected in voter turnout at local elections. We must do more to tell the story of why local democracy matters. We need to improve people's understanding of the local political system and its importance.

## **Votes at 16**

Our young citizens told us that they feel invisible in local politics. They want more of a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Many (but not all) of our young participants want votes at 16. They all agreed that young people should have a say about it, and that voting (for people of all ages) needs to be accompanied by democratic education. In light of our evidence as a whole, we recommend that government should legislate to lower the voting age to 16.

# Elections

We want to develop a vibrant local democracy where all citizens have a stake in their place, a stake which translates through to democratically-elected local councillors through the ballot box.

Our work is firmly grounded in the fundamental principle of representative local democracy. So it's vital that we look at elections in detail – including electoral registration, voter accessibility, engagement and turnout, and the electoral cycle. We've explored all the different issues about elections as a whole, beyond purely the mechanics of voting.

The background information ([Elections and the Electoral Cycle](#)) that we have considered has proved helpful in setting both the national and Kirklees context. Some of the key points for us to consider are:

- **Election trends** – Elections are an area of “growth”. Electoral episodes are increasing in both their diversity and complexity. There is an increasing tendency to combine different elections on the same day.
- **Electoral Law** – The Law Commission has described electoral law as “complex, voluminous and fragmented”. This currently includes 17 statutes and 30 pieces of secondary legislation.
- **Responsibilities** – Electoral Services are responsible for electoral registration and the conduct of all elections and referendums.
- **The electoral cycle** – Kirklees is a Metropolitan District Council. Our councillors are elected for a four year term, by thirds. This means that at each election a third of the council (23 seats, one in each ward) is elected. We hold local elections (formally called District Elections) in three years out of every four. This means that in one year of the cycle there is no local election. We call this a “fallow year”.

We have looked at elections from the perspective of our citizens, in order to better understand the barriers and motivations to democratic engagement and voting.

Through our [Public engagement events](#) we've developed a more detailed understanding of some of the issues that citizens feel are important. These include the need for trustworthy, timely, accessible and valuable information about what is being done by local politicians and what their plans are. Citizens would like a fairer voting and campaigning system, to help get the best people into the council. They feel that voting-related information should be available through a

wide variety of channels, and that people should be given the opportunity to vote in as many ways as possible, including online.

We have explored these issues, along with others, and looked at how we can improve the voter experience as a whole.

## Electoral registration

Registering to vote is an important step on the journey to voting. It is not just about processes and systems. It needs to involve engaging, educating and raising awareness about the value of participation. It is therefore right that we look at electoral registration in the wider context of local democracy. In particular, we need to look at ways in which we can improve current arrangements in order to maximise take up. This involves continuing to reach out to those who feel socially excluded and to empower citizens to have their say, removing any barriers (perceived or real) and working with both our young citizens as well as those who are already of a voting age.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced as part of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill 2012, placing a requirement for each person to register to vote individually, rather than by household. As part of our evidence gathering we heard from [Sharon Salvanos](#), Electoral Services Manager for Kirklees, who told us about the local implications of the introduction of IER.

In terms of registration, we recognise that IER has generally been a positive development although it is not the finished product. There are clearly issues in terms of bureaucracy and increased cost of registration (particularly due to the volume of letters, postage and duplicate applications). Some of this was inevitable in light of the move from a household system of registration to a model based on the individual.

Whilst central government funding has helped the transition, we are encouraged by the hard work that has taken place locally to manage the move to IER. We have maintained our levels of people who are registered to vote in Kirklees, at pre-IER levels. One of the important factors explaining this success is our development of an innovative approach to electoral outreach, an approach that has been shared as an exemplar of good practice by the Cabinet Office.

Outreach work in Kirklees since 2014 has involved the delivery of a range of events, joint working with organisations and community groups to raise public awareness and an ongoing drive to promote and maximise registration across the borough. Whilst these arrangements have been temporarily funded (by the council and government) we recommend that arrangements are put in place to make the Electoral Outreach Officer posts permanent once government funding runs out.

The allocation of funding provided by the government for IER continues to reduce year-on-year, in line with ongoing development of the system. However, we are concerned that the annual reduction may not be balanced by the efficiencies realised. Electoral administration (registration and elections) continues to be an area of growth and whilst the government has invested money, this might not continue.

The outreach role should be expanded to include a strong focus on relevant work to support a wider Local Civic Education programme in Kirklees. This is an important part of the council's role in doing as much as we can to encourage and maximise registration.

We have also heard about other initiatives that could be developed locally to maximise registration. Given our large student population there are real opportunities to work collaboratively with colleges and the University of Huddersfield to integrate electoral registration with the student registration process. We recommend that we develop this kind of approach in Kirklees, building on the successful work that has already taken place in Sheffield.

A strong theme throughout the course of our work has been the focus on including our young citizens in local democracy. We've heard from [Kenny Imafidon](#) of [Bite the Ballot](#) who explained the work that has taken place nationally to raise awareness amongst young people about the importance of politics, democracy and voting.

Kenny advocated a number of proposals that could improve electoral registration for young people, including:

- automatic registration for 16 and 17 year olds
- closer partnership working with schools to register young people in their places of education
- channelling information through people that young people trust
- making greater use of the opportunities presented by digital technology

Given that registration is the first step on the journey to voting, we believe it's important that Kirklees Council and central government do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. It is for this reason we recommend that government legislates to introduce compulsory registration at the age of 16. Furthermore, we recommend that Kirklees Council should work collaboratively with schools to develop an optional approach to registering young people at the age of 16, pending a change in legislation.

We have also heard a national perspective on voter registration from [John Turner](#), Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, and [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) from the Electoral Commission. We learned about a number of issues that we believe are important for increasing the opportunities for voter registration:

- the feasibility and benefits of developing a national database and a single register
- a single point of entry to the register, linked to a unique identifier (for example, National Insurance number)
- registration on the day of polling
- linking registration to issuing National Insurance numbers to 16 year olds

Whilst there may be legislative or technical barriers to achieving some of these proposals, we encourage government to actively pursue them in order to deliver the objective of as accurate and complete an electoral register as possible.

Looking ahead we have also heard about what [John Turner](#) has described as the "ticking time bomb" with regards to resourcing electoral administration once transitional funding from government runs out. [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) explained that the registration process is now more expensive for Electoral Registration Officers and the demographic profile of areas means that it is increasingly difficult to maintain numbers on the register.

We share the Electoral Commission's concern that this situation is not sustainable. We call on government to explore the ways in which more cost-effective and less bureaucratic ways of undertaking IER can be found. This should involve better and more innovative use of available data and giving local Returning Officers the tools to do the job more effectively.

## Voter engagement

Clearly an important aspiration of representative democracy should be to maximise voter turnout, particularly at local elections where citizens have an important stake in influencing what happens in their area. Issues of accessibility, engagement and voter awareness are important factors that affect citizen behaviour in the context of voting.

It is important to note that our work has coincided with the [government response](#) to Sir Eric Pickles' [review of electoral fraud](#). In light of the voter experience, some of these recommendations are relevant, particularly those relating to the introduction of voter identification. This would mean that every person who is voting at a polling station would need to show a form of ID.

We know that the government's recommendation for voters to show ID at the polling station is likely to create additional challenges for Returning Officers. For example, it could push more voters towards requesting a postal vote, which would add to the financial costs of managing elections. We also recognise that it may have serious implications in terms of discouraging voter engagement and turnout.

Episodes of electoral fraud are relatively low, but the perception of fraud is higher. This is important because these perceptions can undermine people's confidence in the voting process. If people feel there is a problem with the system, they may be less likely to vote.

"A vote defrauded is terrible  
but a thousand votes discouraged  
is worse"

**Anthony Zacharzewski**

We believe it is important for us to strike a balance between retaining confidence and integrity in the voting system, and encouraging turnout.

Our research has revealed that there are a wide range of factors which influence a citizen's motivation to vote. These include:

- The profile and importance given to local government elections when compared to national elections.
- The quality of candidates and the availability of information about them.
- The quality, accuracy and accessibility of information relating to the election.

- The mechanics of voting and the extent to which the current approach fits in with the diverse and busy lives that citizens lead.
- The wider issue of civic education and engagement for our young citizens.

It's important for us to focus on what Kirklees Council can do to help, and then look to government to address some of the wider issues that are not in our gift.

## Voter information

As part of our evidence gathering we heard from [Joe Mitchell and Sym Roe](#) from [Democracy Club](#). They shared the findings of their [Towards Better Elections](#) report on the May 2016 elections and the future of digital services for democracy.

Sym and Joe explained that one of the most effective ways of closing the gap between voters and candidates is by providing better information. They discovered a lack of nationwide knowledge about what elections were happening and where. They also learned that there is strong public demand for better information on candidates, especially about "where they stand".

As part of Democracy Club's work, they have independently crowdsourced candidate data with a view to making it available and accessible to the voter. This resulted in the development of the "[Who Can I Vote For?](#)" website, which in 2016 made the details of candidates for all UK elections (13,000 candidates) available in one place for the first time. They have also created a polling station finder facility "[Where Do I Vote?](#)"

Democracy Club have based their work on citizen needs. The top five Google searches in the UK on the day of the 2015 elections were:

- Who should I vote for?
- Who are my local candidates?
- How do I vote?
- Where do I vote?
- Where is my polling station?

Whilst information provision is not solely a council issue, Kirklees Council has an important role to play in providing good quality information about elections and voting. This includes the information we place on our website, blogs and social media channels, and how we make our data available for people to share and



re-use in other ways. This point is supported and acknowledged by the Electoral Commission, who are advocates of Democracy Club's work.

With this in mind we recommend that Kirklees Council should work in partnership with Democracy Club to pilot the ways in which data can be used to increase voter awareness and engagement. The learning should be used to develop a national standard that all councils should aspire to achieving. This work should involve making polling districts and polling station data available to Democracy Club, in a format that meets their [GoldPlus technical standard](#), in addition to sharing other essential elections data in recommended formats.

## Voter turnout

We have discovered that voter turnout is a complex issue - one that is explained and informed by a number of factors. These include the motivations for people to vote, the combinations of elections, the quality of candidates and the extent to which national and local issues dominate as part of each electoral episode.

For example, [Katie Ghose](#) from the Electoral Reform Society explained to us that, whilst there is greater trust in local politicians, we don't see this reflected in voter turnout at local elections. [John Turner](#) explained that there are different motivations for citizens to become engaged with politics in the British model than in other countries. For example, people in Africa will walk for eight hours to vote because they believe local politicians can change the way they will live their lives. People do not have the same belief or incentive in the UK. The average turnout for local elections in the UK is around 30%.

John Turner further explained his belief that politics has to matter to people. If politicians do something (or are perceived to be able to do something) that will drive change or affect someone's lifestyle, then this will increase voter involvement and responses. Citizens will vote if they think it is worthwhile, whether there is some gain or incentive for them to vote.

[Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) explained that research shows that higher participation in voting is driven by having a competitive pool of candidates, alongside a feeling that "your vote matters". When these drop away, so does turnout.

As part of our [Public engagement events](#) we heard a sense of frustration in terms of a lack of knowledge about candidates. Our citizens don't know what candidates stand for or what existing councillors have achieved, and they have few opportunities to hear candidates debating issues in the run up to an election.

In terms of Kirklees, it's difficult for us to directly compare turnout figures across the country, as councils are on different electoral cycles (so we are not comparing like with like in all cases). However, we have looked at turnout for local elections across West Yorkshire over the past four years. All councils in West Yorkshire are currently on the same electoral cycle, with local elections being held three years in every four.

Council	Turnout in 2014	Turnout in 2015	Turnout in 2016
Bradford	38.00%	65.00%	38.00%
Calderdale	36.39%	65.15%	37.80%
Kirklees	35.83%	66.22%	36.41%
Leeds	34.66%	71.33%	36.14%
Wakefield	30.17%	57.60%	30.30%

It's worth noting that in all three years, the local elections were held on the same day as another election, and this has an effect on turnout.

- 2014 - local elections were combined with European Elections.
- 2015 - local elections were combined with the General Election, and also Parish and Town Council Elections took place in some areas.
- 2016 - local elections were combined with the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections.

The most recent stand-alone local election in Kirklees was in May 2012 and the turnout was 35.03%.

We recognise that the council alone cannot address all of these issues. The quality and visibility of candidates, public debate of important and relevant issues, and an overall sense that voting matters are all issues that present complex challenges. Candidate selection is an issue for political parties, which we have addressed elsewhere in this report. In terms of the opportunities to know more about candidates, we hope our work with Democracy Club will begin to improve this.

We also acknowledge the importance of citizens having the opportunity to meet and hear from their candidates in the run up to a local election. We've heard that there is some degree of support for having local hustings as one way of making this happen.

## Schools and young voters

Continuing the theme of what the council can do to help involve more people in elections, we heard from [Sharon Salvanos](#) about the growing pressure to find accessible and acceptable polling stations across Kirklees. This is mainly a result of ever-fewer council and community venues being available, some of which are closing or being sold. Under current voting arrangements, it is of fundamental importance that our polling stations are conveniently placed and accessible.

Elsewhere in this report we have discussed the importance of stakeholders in wider civic society. Local schools are an important part of this. We think the "Schools as Community Hubs" initiative could provide an opportunity to emphasise the civic responsibility that schools have towards local democracy. We therefore recommend that all schools in Kirklees should make their premises available to be used as a polling station on the day of an election. This sends out a strong message that schools are at the heart of our local democracy.

We have also looked in detail at the importance of civic education and civic responsibility for our young citizens. The links with schools are therefore very important, providing opportunities for young people to experience and understand local democracy in a way that we hope will translate into voting.

## Votes at 16

Whilst our work is rooted in the local context, it has also coincided with the recent Scottish Independence Referendum, where 16 year olds were given the vote. In light of this significant development we felt it important to test local feeling, particularly given our strong focus on young citizens.

In our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) 46% said the voting age for local elections should be lowered to 16, to encourage more young people to participate in local democracy.

"If I could vote it would be like we had a voice."

**Kirklees Youth Councillor**

However our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) was divided on this issue, with 51% saying no to lowering the voting age and 33% saying yes.

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) the question divided councillors, with 45% saying yes and 45% saying no.

The [University of Huddersfield Students Union](#) members we heard from unanimously agreed that lowering the voting age would be a good thing. One participant felt that 'young people's voices are getting squashed out by the grey vote'. Several participants did add that votes at 16 would need to be coupled with civic engagement.

[Kirklees Youth Council](#) members who took part in a group discussion said they are in favour of votes at 16. They told us that people would respect young people's views more if they had the vote and that it would give those who want to use their voice an opportunity to speak up.

"Lots of decisions that are being made now will affect us as adults, as students taking out loans or as apprentices looking for jobs. It's our futures that will be decided by what's going on right now."

**Kirklees Youth Councillor**

The Youth Councillors said that if young people could begin voting at age 16 or 17, they would benefit from having the support of their teachers as well as parents, and would therefore be more likely to get into the habit of voting.

They told us that 16 year olds are mature enough to know what they want. They also felt that votes at 16 would encourage candidates to consider young people more when campaigning.

In our [Kirklees democracy debate](#), one of our Youth Councillors said it's important to recognise that not all young people agree with lowering the voting age. What our young citizens do agree on is that young people should have a say about whether the voting age is lowered or not. Young people have also consistently told us that voting (for all ages) needs to be accompanied by democratic education.

Our Youth Councillors suggested that voting at 16 could be trialled for local elections. They described this as a good place to start, as local elections affect you more directly. The trial for votes at 16 which was held in the Norwegian local elections of 2011 offers a useful starting point for thinking about how this could be put to the test.

In the 2011 local elections in Norway, the voting age was lowered from 18 to 16 in selected local areas only, offering a direct comparison for voter turnout where the voting age was lowered. In those local elections, 58% of 16 and 17 year olds turned out to vote. The participation rate among ordinary first time voters (aged 18 to 21) was 46%. Research from this trial ([Why did they vote?](#)) suggested a variety of reasons for the higher turnout. The research didn't find any clear evidence that lowering the voting age to 16 strengthens the habit to vote in the longer term. However, it did show that in local areas which made an effort to share information and dialogue about the political system, this helped to mobilize first time voters.

We conclude that lowering the voting age is clearly and understandably an issue which divides opinion. We have approached this issue in the context of our wider work. We have consistently made the case for the importance of active citizenship and the need to have a strong focus on designing local democracy with our young citizens at the heart.

Whilst voting alone is not a panacea, we feel that it is nevertheless an important part of the journey for an active citizen and as such we place a strong emphasis on widening the opportunity for more of our residents to participate.

It is for this reason we recommend that government should legislate to lower the voting age to 16. We support the idea of trialling votes at 16 for local elections, which would enable our young citizens to take a positive step on their democratic journey.

## Voting methods

Another area we want to consider relates to the actual mechanics of voting and the extent to which current arrangements are in tune with citizens in the 21st century. We have heard lots of views about the ways in which the voting process could be modernised, including online voting, holding elections on different days, voting at any polling station and all-postal votes.

Our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) revealed that 50% of the residents who took part believe they should be able to vote electronically using a smartphone, tablet or laptop. This figure was even higher in our Kirklees Council staff survey, where 63% said they should be able to vote electronically using a smartphone, tablet or laptop.

Our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) showed that 39% of the councillors who responded would advocate the use of online voting. 25% would support having more polling stations in different places, such as supermarkets.

Our discussion with [University of Huddersfield Students Union](#) members revealed a unanimous view that being able to vote electronically would increase turnout in the younger population.

Whilst we're looking for ways to maximise turnout, it has been helpful for us to understand that no single approach appears to be a panacea. [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) shared details of the voting pilots which took place ten years ago.

**The Electoral Commission's evaluation report considered the impact that each of these pilots had on voter turnout. The headline findings were:**

**Online voting and electronic voting** increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. There were issues in respect of set up costs and concerns about security and integrity.

**Early and weekend voting** increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. The Electoral Commission concluded that this approach would be worth implementing, although there would be a cost to the Returning Officer who would need to provide facilities in a range of locations across the area.

**All-postal votes (with no polling stations)** improved turnout although voters who preferred to vote in a polling station were unhappy at having this opportunity removed. It is for this reason that the Electoral Commission did not recommend this as an option moving forward.

We have discovered general support for maximising the benefits of technology, be this online voting or voting at any polling station. People's reasons for supporting this include convenience and the idea that if you can bank online, why can't you vote online? However, there is also a strong consensus that the technology is not yet sophisticated enough to address real or perceived issues of security, fraud and challenge. As [John Turner](#) explained, the current paper-based system, whilst being simplistic, provides an effective audit trail which addresses these issues.

In terms of the other options, we are broadly supportive whilst being mindful of the practical considerations, not least from a cost and administration perspective. We see the benefits of holding elections at the weekend but equally we recognise some of the issues that this may create. For example, there may be additional staffing costs, polling stations might not be available, and the approach may clash with citizens' hobbies, interests and religious activities.

Whilst postal votes do appear to have a positive effect on turnout, there is a significantly greater cost compared to voting at the polling station. The option to move more people to postal votes would be very costly at around £1.59 per postal vote pack, compared to 8p or 9p for votes done in person. The voting experience is also important. Some voters prefer to vote at polling stations.

We have developed a wider understanding of the challenges that each of these options presents in terms of accessibility, security, voter confidence, cost, ease of administration and practical application. Our overall conclusion is that government should continue to explore all of these options with the aim of increasing voter registration, accessibility and turnout.

## The electoral cycle

Our electoral cycle determines how often we have local elections. In Kirklees, we currently have local elections in three years out of every four. We've looked at a range of evidence in order to fully explore and understand the issues, benefits and risks associated with changing our current pattern of elections in Kirklees.

This has included talking to other councils who have moved to a cycle of all-out elections, where there is a local election once every four years, and all seats are therefore up for election at the same time.

At our [Public engagement events](#) we found that any changes are unlikely to have a significant influence on levels of engagement in elections across the population of Kirklees. We had a very interesting debate with citizens about the pros and cons of changing our current system. We heard mixed views about whether it would be a good idea to change to a four-year cycle or to maintain our current arrangements. Generally, citizens were more interested in what councillors do between elections than in the actual electoral cycle itself.

### **Arguments raised for changing to a four-year electoral cycle are that it would:**

- be more cost effective
- reduce the number of pre-election periods
- result in more continuity – less chopping and changing of “key team members” both in Cabinet and in the “backbenches”
- make councillors more accountable as the whole council would be “judged” at the same time at the end of a four-year term
- make elections more of an event, which will catch more people’s attention
- give people time to consider the “bigger issues”
- be easier to understand & easier for the public to get involved in campaigning

### **Arguments for keeping the current arrangements are that it is:**

- less party political than with a four-year system – the results of a once every four-year election are mainly dictated by the perceived success and popularity of the parties who are in power and opposition in Westminster
- provides the option to change – for example, voters get the chance to change councillors if policies are not working or are not what people want
- provides the opportunity for more ongoing engagement – whilst councillors should be encouraged to think about getting constituents more involved on a continual basis, not just at election times, elections do focus the minds of candidates and give residents more opportunity to exercise their democratic rights
- provides the opportunity to refresh the idea of annual elections – if this can be done, creating a new buzz around this as an exciting annual event, then it could help “make voting more of a habit”



In our [Kirklees residents e-panel](#) survey we asked the question “It would save money for us to elect Kirklees Councillors only once every four years, but this would mean you would get to exercise your right to vote less often. How do you feel about this?” The response from residents was:

- 22% - It sounds like a great idea in principle
- 39% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more
- 15% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me
- 23% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

Our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) asked the same question and the response from staff was:

- 31% - It sounds like a great idea in principle
- 47% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more
- 12% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me
- 10% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

The [Labour Group](#) have acknowledged that a four-yearly cycle would reduce costs to the authority of running elections and would provide the ability for us to plan over the long-term which would increase stability. The group also acknowledged that it could potentially generate more interest and therefore may increase voter turnout, although conversely the electorate could actually lose interest if they are only engaged in elections once every four years.

Despite these views, the group believe that the political make up of Kirklees Council means that having elections in three years out of every four can result in significant change. This gives the electorate a greater say and the opportunity to “change its mind” more regularly than once every four years. Reducing this opportunity would be less democratic and would further distance local people from local democracy. The group therefore believe that the current cycle of elections should continue.

The [Conservative Group](#) agree that moving the electoral cycle to every four years, and all out elections, is not an option that should be pursued at this time and under present political arrangements. Any such change would disengage the public, discourage participation in elections, and remove accountability from the democratic process. The group feel it would result in the public having less opportunity to express their views, and allow councillors to ignore public opinion and push through controversial decisions without the need for democratic accountability or explanation.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) believe that the election cycle should only be changed to once every four years if the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) system is introduced. The group believe that elections once every four years do not result in financial savings, and can also lead to fewer people turning out to vote. Changing the election cycle could generate concerns about long-term decision-making. The group feel that Kirklees Council should be aligned to electoral cycles in our neighbouring local authorities, such as Leeds. Unless neighbouring local authorities change their election cycle, Kirklees Council should maintain our current arrangements.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that moving to a cycle of elections once every four years creates an opportunity for the election to be more of an event, whereby political parties would target time and resources more intensely. Such changes should coincide with Parish elections but not national elections. It would also reduce the costs for the council.

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) we asked “How would you feel about changing the election cycle to once every four years?” The response from councillors was:

21% - It sounds like a great idea in principle

26% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more

11% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me

43% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

We have also sought other perspectives:

[Adrian Lythgo](#), in advocating a move to a four-year election cycle, emphasised the need for councils to focus on clear long-term strategic outcomes which by their nature need time to be delivered and achieved. The current cycle of elections affects the capacity of the council to affect change and achieve our strategic outcomes. Current arrangements encourage doing things bit by bit, rather than making significant changes.

[Councillor Robert Light](#), in also advocating a move to four-yearly elections, explained that typically a Cabinet comes into place in late May and begins to agree their priorities and programme of work. Progress is then interrupted by the summer holiday which disrupts continuity at both officer and councillor level. As a result, the actions of any Cabinet do not begin to be approved and implemented until the Autumn, by which time the budget preparation conversations begin and continue through until the budget is agreed in February.

Councillor Light estimated that the equivalent of one year in four is lost as a result. A change in the electoral cycle would play an important part in addressing these issues.

**Rob Vincent** explained that, from an officer perspective, there are strong arguments for having all-out elections once every four years. Rob argued that it provides a long period of brave engagement with strategic challenges, allowing space to address and discuss difficult issues over a period of time. It also means that politicians, in the context of accountability, have something more substantial to take back out to the public at election time. Rob acknowledged the counter argument is that four years is a long time and councillors and the council can find themselves running beyond their natural mandate.

**Cormac Russell** explained that there are benefits in moving to a four-yearly cycle, not least because it allows time for relationships to be developed between councillors and communities. It allows councillors to facilitate neighbourhood planning at a grass roots level, which means that citizens will “start picking out who is doing what, who is playing politics and who is really behind the neighbourhood plan.” People would be voting for what it is they prioritise rather than who they have an affinity for. Cormac acknowledged that this is very important for an elected councillor who will be judged as an advocate of their neighbourhood plan rather than as part of a “beauty contest”.

**Professor Colin Copus** told us that he had mixed views about electoral cycles. All-out elections every four years create a big gap for the electorate in terms of determining who will be in control for that period and being in a position to influence a change. However, there is a virtue of certainty and consistency – a four-yearly cycle allows councillors to make decisions with stable and strategic leadership. The virtue of elections by thirds is that there is a “permanent state of revolution” and the electorate has a greater opportunity to make decisions.

We also considered the practical implications of changing the electoral cycle.

**John Turner** told us that from an electoral administration point of view there are cost savings associated with all-out elections, although the actual cost of an election is shared when electoral episodes are combined.

All-out elections may lower the accuracy of the electoral register, if elections are less frequent, which could lessen the reasons for citizens to register on an annual basis. With a change to all-out elections, there is a risk that those people and staff who are involved in the running of elections will not retain the same skill set or they may not be available. This could result in additional costs to retain staff and maintain training. John explained that if asked he would advise Kirklees Council to retain our current electoral cycle.

[Sharon Salvanos](#) provided us with details of the practical considerations from a Kirklees perspective. Sharon told us that Kirklees Council could change to a four-yearly cycle, which would result in savings of approximately £900k. It would take approximately eight years for us to fully make these savings. The costs of making this change would initially be significantly higher as there would be a need for an all-out election. Although the costs for polling stations and staff would remain the same, costs for printing would be significantly higher due to a much longer ballot paper. Any change would have to be scheduled to coincide with parish elections. The next opportunity for this change would therefore be in 2019.

[Lord Kerslake](#) provided us with an insight into the work he has carried out in Birmingham and shared some findings of the related report ([The way forward: an independent review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council](#)). He explained some of the benefits that can be realised by moving to a four-yearly cycle of elections. These largely relate to the certainty a four-year administration gives and the ability to develop a strategy and implement change over a longer time frame. That said, he made the point that he does not advocate a move to four-yearly elections in all areas, as it's something that needs to be considered in the context of a council's own circumstances.

We are grateful to councils like Bassetlaw and Waveney who provided us with an insight into the motivations and circumstances that governed their decision to change their electoral cycle.

On our visit to [Bassetlaw](#) we heard from senior councillors and officers who explained that their main reason for changing to all-out elections was the financial savings that could be made. Councillors identified that changing the cycle of elections would help to contribute to the overall savings required across the council. Whilst Bassetlaw has only delivered one district election in 2015 since the change, we have found their experience to be helpful.

In particular, we'd like to highlight these points:

- There have not been any issues in terms of the potential loss of staff or the availability of buildings used for polling stations.
- The change has enabled the council to extend the cycle of council meetings from four to six weekly as a result of not having a delay to decision-making during the pre-election period.
- The council received a higher number of customer queries during the 2015 election, as some electors were confused at having up to three choices on the ballot paper.
- Some electors had chosen not to block vote and there were a higher number of "unused votes".
- All standing councillors were re-elected.
- There had been no impact on electoral staff due to the fact that an election has still been held each year since the change to the district council electoral cycle. There has also been an increase in electoral work (Individual Electoral Registration) which means that staffing numbers have stayed the same.
- The financial savings have amounted to approximately a 50% saving, with the majority of savings being achieved from staffing at polling stations, accommodation, postal vote printing and postage.
- The consistency of leadership resulting from the change to the election cycle has enabled officers to understand and respond to the longer term direction of travel as determined by Cabinet. This has resulted in a more stable environment and the opportunity for consistency to achieve long-term plans.
- The council feel they have become a stronger council following the move to all-out elections, as the struggle to make decisions through the pre-election period has been reduced.

We also heard from [Arthur Charvonia](#), Joint Strategic Director for Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council. Arthur told us that the change process began in 2005, following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment which highlighted, amongst other things, that electing in thirds was holding the performance of the council back.

Another reason for the change relates to the nature of the politics in Waveney. Electing in thirds could mean that a change in the leadership landscape was a high possibility at every election, which could discourage the administration from doing anything unpopular. Arthur explained that this made it increasingly difficult for the administration to plan over the long term or to make difficult and unpopular decisions which were essential in the context of the wider performance issues.

In relation to the performance issues, there was a clear message delivered by the Audit Commission that the council's ability to improve performance would be made easier if they moved to four-yearly elections.

In particular we'd like to highlight these points:

- The council anticipated an increase in by-elections but this has not been the case.
- Turnout depends on the combination of elections and increases if combined with General Elections or Referenda.
- The council is not confident that the public are fully aware of the change, as there has still been an election of some form each year since the changes. That said, the council feel that the issue of confusion has reduced due to fewer ballot papers being issued at each election.
- There has been a reduction in the cost of elections (staffing on the day and postal votes) although this has not resulted in a reduction in the size of the Elections team given the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the continuing mixture of electoral episodes.
- Electing every four years allows councillors to focus on the electorate and their concerns outside of election periods.
- There has been a significant turnover of councillors (approximately a third remain) although this is as much to do with the shifting age profile as the change to the cycle.
- The council believes that the changes have resulted in stronger leadership who are confident in their direction and are able to provide a longer term political vision and action plan.
- Officers are able to establish a clear position in terms of the challenges and opportunities for the organisation, which helps with staff understanding and buy-in over the longer term. It has assisted in addressing the performance and finance issues that were identified by the Audit Commission.
- The Leader and Cabinet have developed a much stronger platform, one which they could be held accountable for by both the opposition and the electorate.

## The Kirklees electoral cycle

In terms of the Kirklees position, we have found this particular area of our work the most challenging to resolve. We've heard many different views and perspectives on issues of cost and administration, leadership, continuity, strategic governance, representation, voting being habit-forming, making elections an event and maximising clarity for the voter. We've considered all of these issues carefully.

We have also been made aware of the dynamic nature of the electoral landscape, characterised by an increase in different electoral episodes and a growing tendency to combine those episodes on the same day. Does this create more opportunities for citizens to vote or does it result in confusion and dilute the importance and profile of local elections? Does this create increasing challenges for the administration of elections or does it assist councils in bearing the cost of those elections as a result of combining different elections?

We have not been able to resolve whether these are collectively positive or negative developments, although we do recognise that they are very relevant when considering the electoral cycle.

In terms of our own cycle of elections, we have fully debated the arguments for and against making a change. A strong focus of our deliberations has been on the points made with regards to leadership, governance and continuity. We debated the potential savings that could be made by changing our electoral cycle (the initial additional costs of holding an all-out election and the overall savings over an eight year period). We weighed up all these considerations against the importance of providing regular opportunities for our citizens to vote in elections. Voting is habit-forming and something that we should encourage.

We also considered the potential implications of an all-out election in terms of the possible loss of experienced councillors at a time when the council is going through a period of significant change.

We are mindful that we're considering this issue at a time when there is considerable flux both nationally and regionally in terms of current and potential electoral issues. Currently general elections are every five years, which is potentially helpful if we wanted to plan our electoral cycle in a way that avoids combining elections. This would give us an opportunity to make local elections an important, stand-out event.

However, these arrangements do not rule out the possibility of any government calling a snap election, which could have an impact on this aspiration. Recent events have brought this issue into sharp focus.

We must also consider the dynamic nature of regional governance and the potential of a Mayoral election in the near future. This may also have implications for the Police and Crime Commissioner election, if a regional Mayor takes on these responsibilities as part of their role. This all creates uncertainty and means that we could be potentially making changes to our own electoral cycle at a time when we are unclear as to how this landscape will be mapped out.

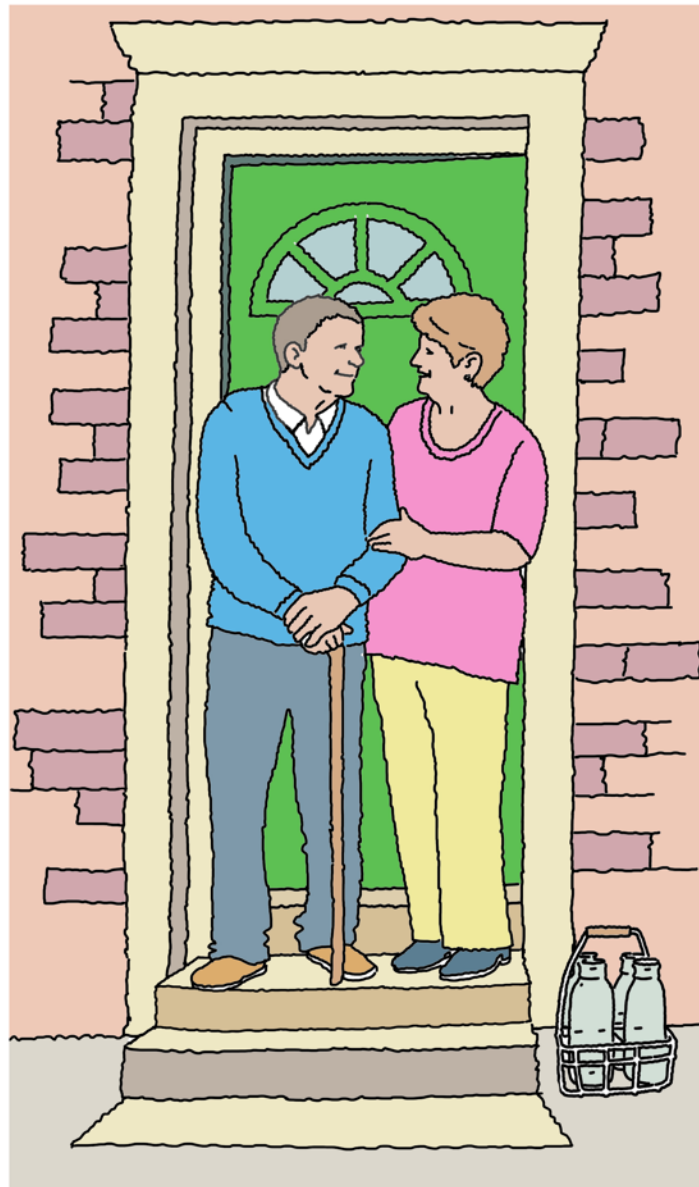
Having weighed these factors up in the balance, alongside all the evidence we have received, we have not found it possible to reach a consensus. We have not found a fully compelling case for us to change our cycle of elections at the current time.

It is clear that we are currently operating in a fluid electoral landscape. To recommend changes now would be akin to aiming at a moving target. We therefore recommend continuing with our current electoral cycle of having local elections three years out of every four. Nevertheless it is important that Kirklees Council sees this as a very live issue, one that should be revisited when there is greater clarity, especially in terms of regional governance.

In the meantime we feel it is important for us to make some wider recommendations based on what we have found. We believe that national government has an important role to play in considering the importance of local democracy when it is planning and legislating in respect of the timing and sequence of elections. Local elections are important events and should be recognised as such. We do not wish to see a further dilution of local democracy.

We also recommend that Mayoral elections for the region should be planned and scheduled in a way that does not have a negative impact on local democracy.





**Kirklees Democracy Commission**

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**“By 2020 Kirklees is an informed citizen-led democracy with accountable elected representatives who enable communities to influence and affect decisions governing their lives”**