Title: Extending the electoral timetable for UK Parliamentary elections	Impact Assessment (IA)
IA No:	**Date:** 03/05/2012
Lead department or agency: Cabinet Office	**Stage:** Development/Options
Other departments or agencies:	**Source of intervention:** Domestic
	Type of measure: Primary legislation
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Summary: Intervention and Options

RPC Opinion: RPC Opinion Status

Cost of Preferred (or more likely) Option				
Total Net Present Value	**Business Net Present Value**	**Net cost to business per year** (EANCB on 2009 prices)	**In scope of One-In, One-Out?**	**Measure qualifies as**
£1.7m	NA	N/A	No	NA

What is the problem under consideration? Why is government intervention necessary?

The existing statutory electoral timetable for electing MPs to the House of Commons ('UK Parliamentary elections' - ie general and by-elections) is considerably shorter than the timetable for other UK elections, which results in a number of problems. The large number of different operational processes that must be compressed into a small time period represents a significant risk to the effective conduct of elections. In particular, overseas and service voters are placed at a disadvantage as they only have a small window for completing and returning their postal votes. An extended timetable would reduce the risk to the effective conduct of these polls, particularly as elections are increasingly being combined.

What are the policy objectives and the intended effects?

We propose to extend the statutory timetable for UK Parliamentary general elections from 17 to 25 working days. The by-election timetable will be extended by 8 working days from 13 to 19 working days to 21 to 27 working days. Extended timetables will significantly reduce the key risk to the robustness of the process. Furthermore, the improved sequencing of processes will allow more time for voters to receive and return postal votes, particularly benefitting those overseas, including service personnel abroad.

What policy options have been considered, including any alternatives to regulation? Please justify preferred option (further details in Evidence Base)

0) Base Case - do nothing. As now, administrators will still be able to run Parliamentary elections but the problems identified above will continue to exist. The Coalition's constitutional changes are likely to place greater pressure on the electoral system, which will exacerbate these issues, potentially compromising the future delivery of elections.

1) Option 1 - Extend the timetable for UK Parliamentary elections, aligning it with other electoral timetables where practicable. In addition, improve the sequencing of certain processes, such as the deadline for candidate nominations, the deadline for appointing polling and counting agents and when alterations of the electoral register can be published, to reduce risk to the process and improve the service for voters.

Will the policy be reviewed? It will be reviewed. **If applicable, set review date:** 10/2015					
Does implementation go beyond minimum EU requirements?			No		
Are any of these organisations in scope? If Micros not exempted set out reason in Evidence Base.	**Micro** No	**< 20** No	**Small** No	**Medium** No	**Large** No
What is the CO$_2$ equivalent change in greenhouse gas emissions? (Million tonnes CO$_2$ equivalent)			**Traded:** N/A		**Non-traded:** N/A

I have read the Impact Assessment and I am satisfied that, given the available evidence, it represents a reasonable view of the likely costs, benefits and impact of the leading options.

Signed by the responsible Minister: .... Date: .... 4 May 2012 ....

Summary: Analysis & Evidence   Policy Option 1

Description:
FULL ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

Price Base **Year** 2012	PV Base **Year** 2012	Time Period **Years** 10	Net Benefit (Present Value (PV)) (£m)		
			Low: -£0.8m	**High:** £3.3m	**Best Estimate:** £1.7m

COSTS (£m)	Total Transition (Constant Price) Years	Average Annual (excl. Transition) (Constant Price)	Total Cost (Present Value)
Low	£0m	-£0.1m	**-£0.8m**
High	£0m	£0m	**£0m**
Best Estimate	£0m	£0m	**£0m**

Description and scale of key monetised costs by 'main affected groups'

It will be a decision for Returning Officers (ROs) whether it is practicable to carry out an additional postal ballot pack print run, following the update, based on their own assessment of the costs and benefits and available resources. Low costs assume that no Returning Officers exercise this option while high costs assume that all do. The best estimate is a mid-point.

Other key non-monetised costs by 'main affected groups'

Electoral Registration Officers will be required to publish two additional updates to the electoral register but this will not be an additional administrative burden as electoral administrators have confirmed that the process for updating the register and sending it to the relevant stakeholders is straightforward.

BENEFITS (£m)	Total Transition (Constant Price) Years	Average Annual (excl. Transition) (Constant Price)	Total Benefit (Present Value)
Low	£0m	£0m	**£0m**
High	£0m	£0.4m	**£3.3m**
Best Estimate	£0m	£0.2m	**£1.7m**

Description and scale of key monetised benefits by 'main affected groups'

Aligning UK Parliamentary elections to the normal 25 day election timetable will allow joint poll cards for simulanteous elections to be produced more easily, leading to a potential saving of around £2m (2012/13 price terms) at each general election. An extra 8 working days will also reduce the pressure that exists in the timetable. This will reduce overtime and allow more checks to be made during the process, reducing the risk of errors and the resultant extra costs being incurred.

Other key non-monetised benefits by 'main affected groups'

Postal voters (particularly overseas and service voters) will have longer to complete and return their postal ballot pack, reducing the risk that postal votes will not arrive back in time. Aligning the timetable with other polls will also help to bring greater consistency to the conduct of elections where they are combined.

Key assumptions/sensitivities/risks	**Discount rate (%)**	3.5

In calculating the costs and benefits of this proposal it should be noted that it is not mandatory for ROs to produce joint poll cards at combined polls. It is also for ROs to determine whether it is practicable to send out an additional tranche of postal votes, our proposals will give them the flexibility to do so but it is a decision for ROs to take locally. We have also assumed that elections will take place in the years that they are currently scheduled to do so. This could obviously change.

BUSINESS ASSESSMENT (Option 1)

Direct impact on business (Equivalent Annual) £m:			In scope of OIOO?	Measure qualifies as
Costs: N/A	**Benefits:** N/A	**Net:** N/A	No	OUT

Evidence Base (for summary sheets)

Problem under consideration and rationale for intervention

The existing election timetable[1] for UK Parliamentary elections[2] is considerably shorter than for other UK elections which results in a number of problems. The timetable requires a large number of tasks to be compressed into a small time period, which places considerable pressure on the administrative process and represents a significant risk to the effective conduct of these elections. Furthermore, the current timetable only allows overseas and service voters a small window to return their postal votes, which is likely to impact on the participation of this group.

The current electoral timetables for general elections and by-elections are set out at Annex 1.
Our proposed extended electoral timetables for general elections and by-elections are set out at Annex 2.

Description of options considered (including do nothing)

Option 0: Do nothing
As now, administrators will still be able to run Parliamentary elections but the problems set out above will continue to exist.

Costs & Benefits
Taking no action given the increasing combination of elections and the degree of change increases the risk of electoral petitions and re-run polls. There is a risk of damaging public confidence in the electoral system if more polls suffer administrative failings. In addition, this option will leave in place the barriers to participation for overseas and service voters. Administrators and other stakeholders such as the Electoral Commission have requested that the timetable be extended to address the risk to the effective delivery of polls.

Option 1: Extend the election timetable
This is the preferred option. Whilst there are a number of options for the length of the timetable, an extension to 25 working days would allow the greatest alignment with the local government election timetable (the elections most frequently combined with UK Parliamentary elections). The timetable for by-elections would remain flexible, as now, but be extended in line with our proposals for the general election timetable. In effect, this will mean that it will be between 21 and 27 working days.

Under an extended electoral timetable, we also have the opportunity to improve the sequencing of certain processes and improve the service currently available to voters.

Monetised costs

Under our proposals, administrators will now be able to send their first tranche of postal ballot packs after the 19th working day before the poll, because the deadline for the close of candidates' nominations will be moved from 11 to 19 working days before the poll. This should ease the pressure in the system. They will now also be able to send an additional tranche of postal ballot packs, if it is practicable to do so, before the final tranche are sent after the 5th working day before the poll. This would not increase postage costs because under the current proposals these postal ballot packs would still be sent as part of the final tranche. However, this additional tranche would require an additional print run. The Electoral Reform Services (ERS) estimate that to set up a print run costs between £100 and £300. Therefore, if electoral administrators send an additional batch of data to be printed then the cost to the local authority of running the election will be increased.

There are 407 local authorities in Great Britain. If the average cost of setting up a print run is £225 and if all the local authorities in GB chose to send an additional batch of data to the printer then the process would cost an estimated £91,575.

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[1] The election timetable is the period leading up to the day of poll during which certain processes must be undertaken by Returning Officers, who are responsible for the running of the election.
[2] UK Parliamentary elections include general elections and by-elections

However, it will be a decision for electoral administrators whether an additional print run is practicable and the funding that the Government provides for the running of electoral services will not be increased. Returning Officers will therefore have to make a decision about what is practicable from the funding that is provided to them, in the context of locally negotiated contracts with printers and suppliers. For instance, if a local authority is able to achieve a cost saving elsewhere and believes that sending an additional tranche of postal ballot packs would be justified, as a significant number of new registrants have requested a postal vote, then they may choose to pay for an additional print run.

This requirement to produce updated versions of the register will also apply, under the Bill, to the following elections.

- Local elections in England and Wales (including GLA elections)
- European elections in Great Britain
- Scottish Parliamentary elections
- Scottish local elections
- National Assembly for Wales elections
- Police and Crime Commissioner elections

This means that an additional printing cost may also be incurred in the run up to other polls. However, as with UK Parliamentary elections, the Government is only requiring the register to be updated. It will be for the electoral administrators to weigh up the practicability of an additional print run.

We have estimated that if every electoral administrator chose to fund an additional print run, at every election to which these provisions apply, from the likely commencement date of these provisions, 2014, until 2021, then the overall cost to the taxpayer would be an estimated £1m (2012/13 price terms).

Non-monetised costs

As set out above, our proposals will require electoral administrators to publish two additional updates to the electoral register. However, this should not be an additional administrative burden as electoral administrators have confirmed that to update the electoral register and send the update to the relevant stakeholders is a very simple process.

As set out above, it will be for ROs to determine whether the additional print run is practicable and factored into this decision will be whether they have the necessary staffing resources to do so. As discussed below, the extension of the timetable should remove some of the pressure from the system, which in turn may give administrators more time to carry out additional duties.

Monetised benefits

Increased consistency with local elections

Uncertainty over the date of a UK Parliamentary election has previously been a barrier to the ability of electoral administrators and suppliers to prepare and print joint documents for combined polls, such as poll cards. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has now removed this uncertainty but the difference of 8 working days between the timetable for local elections and the current timetable for Parliamentary elections is still a problem when trying to produce joint documents. Electoral Administrators have advised that having a 25 day timetable for both UK Parliamentary and local elections could lead to more ROs deciding to produce and distribute joint poll cards when polls are combined.

For the 2010 General Election only 11% of poll cards were combined for combined polls whereas in the 2009 European Elections 98% of poll cards were combined for combined polls. The average cost to central government of producing and distributing poll cards was £3000 less (for each Parliamentary Constituency) where poll cards could be combined (Source: Cabinet Office administrative data). It is assumed that as a result of removing the twin barriers of uncertain timescales (in the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011) and misaligned administrative timescales the percentage of combined poll cards for combined polls will rise to the level of the 2009 European elections, for which neither barrier was present.

Assuming that local government saves an equivalent sum this would imply that the public sector will save around £2m (2012/13 price terms) at each general election, or around £4m (2012/13 price terms) in the appraisal period. It is anticipated that this £4m saving will be realised but it is not clear to what proportion of the saving can be attributable to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 and what proportion will be attributable to the administrative provisions of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill. The high estimate thus assumes that the entire saving is attributable to the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill while the low estimate conservatively assumes that it is due to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. As it is unclear what proportion of the benefit is attributable to each policy the best estimate assumes that the 50% is attributable to each bill and therefore that the benefit of the administrative provisions of this bill will be £2m (2012/13 price terms).

<u>Non-monetised benefits</u>

Impact for postal voters

The current timetable means that there is only a small window for overseas and service voters to receive and return their postal votes (1 to 2 weeks for Returning Officers to issue the postal ballot packs and for postal voters to return them). The extension will relieve pressure on administrators and increase the window for postal votes to be sent and returned.

- There were 32,733 overseas electors in 2010, an increase on the number in the previous year which was 14,915[3]. However, this is a small proportion of the total number of UK nationals overseas. No central record is kept of the number of armed forces personnel who registered and voted at either the 2010 UK Parliamentary election or the referendum on the voting system in May 2011. However, the Defence Analytical Services and Advice Survey conducted by the Ministry of Defence in 2010 showed that an estimated 75 per cent of Service personnel were registered to vote; this is up from 69 per cent in 2009. It is argued, notably by the Families Federations of the Armed Forces, that the time available for postal votes to reach and be completed by service personnel (and in some cases their families) is a key reason why registration and participation amongst this group is low.

With the increase in the numbers of voters who are choosing to vote by post and the likelihood that more polls will be combined in the future, there is a very real risk that these problems will worsen and threaten the successful running of elections. There has been a steady increase in the number of postal voters since 2001 when postal voting on demand was introduced (previously voters had to give a reason if they wished to vote by post).   To illustrate, at the 2001 General Election approximately 4% of electors (2 million) were postal voters but by the 2010 General Election this had increased to 15% (7 million). These benefits have not been monetised due to the absence of a robust methodology for monetising them.

Impact on electoral administrators

The current timetable for UK Parliamentary Elections and the sequencing of the processes within it places considerable pressure on electoral administrators and can lead to staff working a significant amount of overtime to ensure that postal votes are sent out on time. We anticipate that a longer timetable should limit the amount of staff overtime which will be required to issue postal votes and thereby reduce costs. We are unable to put a cost on the precise savings which will be made as the information we have at our disposal from the 2010 UK Parliamentary election covers the overtime which is worked for all elements of the poll and not the postal voting process. This benefit has not been monetised due to uncertainty over its magnitude.

Impact on printers and suppliers

Due to the considerable pressures in the current timetable, anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of printers and suppliers are unable or unwilling to provide printing services. However, we anticipate that by reducing the pressure in the system we will also remove the barriers which prevent these suppliers from tendering their services. This will increase competition in the long run and potentially enable local authorities to make a saving on the costs associated with printing services. This benefit has not been monetised due to uncertainty over its magnitude.

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[3] Based on data provided by the Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland, and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland