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## Council polls could be scrapped

**Next year's local elections in England could be abandoned under plans being considered by the government, the BBC has learned.**



The elections could make way for reform plans

Whitehall officials have told council chiefs they are considering cancelling the May 2007 polls because of possible plans for a local government shake-up.

The move would avoid electing councils which would sit for just one year.

Minister David Miliband says there has been no decision on council reform and he intends for the polls to go ahead.

But Conservatives and Lib Dems say Labour would benefit from avoiding local polls as Tony Blair prepares to step down and hand power to Gordon Brown.

### 'Inefficient'

Elections are due in May 2007 in about 300 English local councils.

The government intends to publish a White Paper on reforming local councils this summer, with the hope they would become law in spring 2007.

There would then be "shadow" votes for the newly reformed councils in 2008, with them taking power in 2009.

BBC News 24's chief political correspondent, James Landale, said officials from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) discussed the possibility of cancelling the May 2007 elections in meetings with council chiefs in the last few weeks.



Mr Miliband says the elections idea is "pure speculation"

In the minutes of one meeting, seen by BBC News, ODPM officials said it was "highly unlikely" the elections would go ahead, not least because "it would not be very efficient to hold elections for a one-year term".

The Minister for Communities, Mr Miliband, said Tory claims that he had personally told a council chief executive he wanted the elections cancelled were "absolute rubbish".

### 'Debate gathers pace'

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In a statement, he said: "I have never said this. No decisions have been reached about local government reorganisation and therefore this is all pure speculation."

Mr Miliband added: "We expect and intend the 2007 elections to go ahead."

"The debate on local government reorganisation is gathering pace - we are having a mature discussion with local government - and we will make our position clear in the Local Government White Paper in the middle of this year."

Earlier this week ministers began talks with council leaders outside England to test opinion on combining county councils and district councils in rural areas.

**“ It would be dreadful for Mr Blair to receive a drubbing at the polls so it would be convenient just to suspend democracy ”**

Eric Pickles  
Tory shadow minister

But Conservative shadow local government minister Eric

[Q&A: Local council reforms](#)

Pickles said Mr Miliband was trying to help Mr Blair retire from Downing Street without suffering an election embarrassment.

"It would be dreadful for Mr Blair to receive the drubbing he would undoubtedly receive at the polls next year so it would be convenient just to suspend democracy," he said.

Mr Pickles told BBC News 24 he knew Mr Miliband had personally told one council chief executive he would like to cancel the elections.

Reforming local government could cost £3.5bn without improving public services, claimed the MP, a former council leader.

### 'Extremely unlikely'

Liberal Democrat spokeswoman Sarah Teather said the cost of reforms would hit council taxpayers already struggling to pay their bills.

"Labour must not deprive people of their democratic right just because they're doing badly in local government and want to avoid an awkward mid-term election," she said.

Ms Teather said people really wanted decent public services but the government seemed obsessed with reorganisation.

The leader of the Local Government Association, Sir Sandy Bruce Lockhart, said he would be asking Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott about the idea of cancelling the elections.

Sir Sandy said it was the first he had heard of the idea and he thought it was "extremely unlikely" it would happen.

He said Mr Prescott's department has assured him it would talk to the LGA if it had any proposals on reorganisation.

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