

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: COUNCIL – 25 JUNE 2008

BY: HEAD OF CUSTOMER, LEGAL AND MEMBER SERVICES

SUBJECT: MOVING THE DATE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN 2009

PURPOSE: To seek the Council's views on a Consultation Paper on Proposals to move the date of local government elections to the date of the European Parliament Elections in 2009

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Views have been sought about moving the date of the local government elections from 7 May 2009, so that they take place on the same day as the European Parliamentary Election on 4 June 2009.
- 1.2 There are arguments both in favour and against combining the elections and the consultation seeks views on where the balance lies.

2.0 LOCAL ELECTIONS 2009

- 2.1 In 2009 the County Council elections are scheduled to be held on 7 May. Although some areas may also have parish council elections there are none scheduled in South Holland.

3.0 BENEFITS OF ELECTIONS BEING HELD ON THE SAME DAY

- 3.1 The Consultation Paper has identified the following as being the benefits of holding the European Parliamentary elections and the local government elections on the same day:

- (a) It will be more convenient for voters to have to visit the polling station once only, meaning that more voters are likely to participate in the election.

Comment: When local and European Parliamentary Elections were combined in 2004, the turnout at the European Elections was significantly higher than in previous years up from 24% in 1999 to 38.5%. The Electoral Commission concluded that the combination of the elections was an important factor in the improved turnout.

- (b) It will result in the election period for the local and European elections running together and avoid the start of the European election period overlapping with end of the local government election period.

Comment:

- *If the date of the local elections is not changed to the date of the European elections then, as the timetable for the European Parliamentary elections runs for 25 working days prior to polling day, there would be an overlap in the timetable for that election with the closing stages of the local elections on 7 May.*

- *There is a risk of confusion for electors who may receive poll cards for the European elections prior to voting in the local elections.*
 - *If elections are not combined administrators will be required to publish the notice of election and deal with nominations from candidates for the European elections in the week leading up to polling day for the local elections.*
- (c) It will reduce costs incurred by local authorities, returning officers and political parties in distributing election material, contacting voters, canvassing and holding the polls themselves.
- Comment:*
- *Savings in particular will be around the hiring and staffing of polling stations.*
 - *It is suggested that savings for political parties will be achieved in election campaigns being held simultaneously.*
- (d) Those responsible for voter awareness campaigns, particularly local authorities, will be able to concentrate their efforts in increasing awareness of one single election day.

4.0 PRACTICAL ISSUES

4.1 Notwithstanding the benefits of holding elections on the same day this also gives rise to some practical issues. The practical issues are around the following:

- (a) Electoral arrangements will be more complex and Returning Officers will have to maintain two separate ballots and conduct two separate counts. There are practicalities in counting arrangements as the count for the European election can not take place until the evening of Sunday 7 June. This would not prevent verification and counting of the ballot papers for the local election immediately after polling on Thursday 4 June.

Comment:

- *Combining elections does make the administration more complex and also increases pressure on staff in terms of meeting statutory deadlines. Postal votes are likely to give rise to problems in terms of volumes to issue and receive.*
 - *It is essential that the necessary orders and guidance for the combined elections are issued early in the process to enable appropriate planning in good time.*
- (b) Postponement of the County Council elections would mean that the terms of office for the existing County Councillors would be extended until 7 June 2009. This would have administrative implications for the County Council which would have to delay its annual meeting.

Comment: The County Council will have been consulted on the proposals and will no doubt submit their own representations.

- (c) Where local authorities have parish elections in May 2009 a decision would also be required on whether or not to change the date of these.

Comment: Although this does not affect South Holland, if the date of parish council elections is not moved to coincide with the European and County Council elections it would seem to negate a majority of the benefits of moving the County Council elections, particularly around costs.

(d) It might be argued that holding two elections on the same day could confuse electors.

Comment: The different electoral systems for local government elections and European elections may contribute to this. In particular the first past the post system in local elections and the list system in European elections.

5.0 WEEKEND VOTING

5.1 Although the Consultation Paper only seeks views on whether or not the date of local government elections in 2009 should be moved to the same date as the European Parliamentary elections, it is understood that a further consultation paper is to seek views on weekend voting and whether this would improve access to voting.

6.0 VIEWS SOUGHT

6.1 Specifically the Consultation Paper seeks views on four questions. These are detailed below together with comments from officers:

6.1.1 Question 1

Do you believe that Government should seek to move the date of the local elections in 2009 from 7 May to 4 June, so that they are held on the same day as the European Parliamentary elections?

Suggested response: This would be supported on the basis that it would be more convenient for voters to have to vote on one day only, it would reduce the costs of holding the elections for returning officers and political parties and should increase voter turnout for both elections.

6.1.2 Question 2

If we move the elections to principal authorities should we also move the date of parish council elections where they are scheduled to take place on 7 May 2009?

Comment: Although there are no parish council elections scheduled for 2009 in South Holland the dates should be moved. Failure to do so will negate many of the benefits that will accrue from moving the date of the County Council elections.

6.1.3 Question 3

What practical issues do you foresee in combining effectively local (and where applicable, parish) elections with the European Parliamentary elections?

Comment: For those local authorities affected it will be necessary to reschedule meetings, including the Annual Council meeting. These are not insurmountable problems.

The combining of elections does make the administration more complex. However this has been done previously with success.

6.1.4 Question 4

What action do you think should be taken to address these practical issues (whether by local authorities, Government or the Electoral Commission)?

Comment: It is essential that arrangements are made in good time and guidance issued by the Electoral Commission also in good time. This will enable appropriate planning and thereby reduce the risks which are increased by making the process more complex.

6.2 Members may have other views and are invited to express these.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The costs of holding European and County Council elections are reimbursed. Accordingly the proposals would have no direct impact on this Council. There should be savings to the cost of holding the County Council elections although the Consultation Paper does not indicate responsibility for costs.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduced powers to combine, by means of an order, local elections and European Parliamentary elections. The power also allows amendments to other legislation to deal with certain practical consequences of moving the election date. There are no legal implications on this authority.

9.0 RISK MANAGEMENT

9.1 As with all elections there are risk management issues. Combining the polls does make the processes more complex. If the elections are combined the process will be added to the operational risk register and appropriate steps taken to minimise the level of risks.

4.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

4.1 **That, subject to other views that may be expressed by members, responses be made to the specific questions asked in the consultation paper as detailed in section 6 above.**

Background papers:- Communities and Local Government Consultation Paper – Moving the date of English Local Government Elections to the date of the European Parliamentary Elections in 2009

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Appendices: None

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

Please contact Jim Scarsbrook, the Head of Customer, Legal and Member Services if you want more information about this report or the background papers. You can contact him/her:

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