

Moving the Date of the English Local Government Elections to the Date of the European Parliament Elections in 2009

Finance and Administration, item 8

Committee:	Finance and Administration	Agenda Item
Date:	26 June 2008	8
Title:	Moving the Date of English Local Government Elections to the Date of the European Parliament Elections in 2009	
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Summary

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is consulting on the possibility of combining the English local government elections in 2009 with the election to the European Parliament. Comments are invited to be sent by no later than 11 August 2008.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members determine their views on whether or not the elections should be combined to enable a response to be sent.

Background Papers

DCLG consultation paper 'Moving the date of English Local Government elections to the date of the European Parliament elections in 2009'

Impact

Communication/Consultation	This is a Government consultation
Community Safety	No implications
Equalities	Not applicable
Finance	No direct cost to the Council
Human Rights	Not applicable
Legal implications	No implications
Sustainability	Not applicable
Ward-specific impacts	All wards

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Workforce/Workplace	No implications
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Situation

- 1 Local elections in England are due to take place on 7 May 2009. As far as this Council is concerned, the Council's Returning Officer, in the role of Deputy Returning Officer, will be responsible for organising the poll for the election of Essex County Councillors for the four divisions of Dunmow, Saffron Walden, Stansted and Thaxted, included within the Uttlesford District.
- 2 Elections to the European Parliament are due to take place four weeks later on 4 June 2009. Following the 2004 European election, when the poll was combined with local government elections held that year, the Electoral Commission stated 'Before the next European Parliamentary elections in 2009 further consideration will need to be given to the potential impact of the combination of elections'.
- 3 This consultation seeks to draw out the balance of arguments in favour and against combinations and invites views from interested parties.
- 4 The Representation of the People Act 1983 provides the power to make an order combining the elections. Such an order must be made by no later than 7 November 2008. If an order is made both elections will take place on 4 June 2009 as the date of the European election is fixed by all member states.
- 5 If Members wish to take a view about this matter, the Committee is asked to form a view about the following questions:
 - Do you believe the 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?
 - 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?
 - What practical issues do you foresee in combining effectively local (and where applicable, parish) elections with the European Parliamentary elections?
 - What action do you think should be taken to address these practical issues?
- 6 The document lists the following benefits of combination:
 - Added convenience for voters who will not have to vote twice in a short time.
 - Combination of elections is now well established and removes barriers to voting.

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- The turnout in 2004 was significantly higher than in 1999 when there was no combination.
 - If there is no combination there will be an overlap between the two election timetables.
 - This may cause confusion to electors and complications for electoral administrators.
 - The costs of running the polls will be reduced and there will be savings for political parties in campaign costs.
- 7 Concerns about combination are stated as:
- Holding elections on the same day is a complex exercise for returning officers and electoral administrators. This is exacerbated by the dependency of returning officers on commercial suppliers for a variety of services, in particular, ballot papers and postal voter packs.
 - There is potential for confusion among electors, especially when different electoral systems are being used.
 - The Gould report on the elections in Scotland in 2007 highlighted the extra risk of confusion caused by combining two votes on the same ballot paper; the Government believes that a combination of polls should not involve a combination of ballot papers in 2009, and that the two papers should be dealt with separately.
 - The Government is also consulting on whether weekend voting would support the aim that people should be able to vote with ease and without unnecessary barriers.
- 8 One aspect not mentioned in the consultation paper is the issue of which boundaries are to be used for the European election. Although not strictly relevant to the question of combination, this is a key consideration for officers in administering the election. If the elections are combined, the question of boundaries will become relevant as explained below.
- 9 At the 2004 European election, local authority boundaries were used. Prior to that, European elections were administered on Parliamentary constituency boundaries. It is immeasurably easier to administer any election on district boundaries, although this is clearly not possible for Parliamentary elections.
- 10 If Parliamentary boundaries are to be used, there is some confusion as to whether the elections would operate on existing, or new boundaries. Early clarification about the boundaries to be used is being sought.
- 11 If the elections are to be combined, the difficulty with this particular combination is dealing with the cross boundary arrangements. This involves, among other things, appointing and paying another authority's staff, arranging for polling stations in that area, collecting and verifying the votes, and then handing back the verified votes for counting. There is also the difficulty of dealing with the new postal vote personal identifier arrangements.

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- 12 As European elections operate using a regional list system, there seems no good reason why anything other than local authority boundaries should be used as the relevant administrative units. Members are asked to consider this point in agreeing a response.
- 13 The consultation asks for views about whether parish elections scheduled for 7 May should be moved. Although no parish elections are due to take place in Uttlesford, if the Committee agrees to the election of a new parish of Flich Green (see separate item) it is likely that the election will be scheduled for that day. In that case it seems unnecessary to move the parish election and it is suggested that should be included as part of the Council's response.
- 14 Taking account of the arguments summarised in this report, the Committee is asked to agree a response to the consultation.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
That the elections are challenged on the grounds of failing procedures.	1	4	This is a personal risk of the Returning Officer, who carries adequate insurance against the possibility of challenge.