
COMBINING ENGLISH LOCAL AUTHORITY, GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY AND EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN 2004 – CONSULTATION PAPER

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the main points in the consultation paper from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on the proposal to combine the local council, Greater London Authority (GLA) and European Parliamentary elections on 10 June 2004. The paper also seeks views on weekend voting. Comments on the consultation document are required by 31 January 2003.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The purpose of the consultation paper is to seek views on moving the date of the local council elections from 6 May 2004 to 10 June 2004 so that they take place on the same day as the European Parliamentary elections.
- 2.2 This proposal forms part of the Government's strategy to modernise the electoral system and increase voter participation. Research shows that turnouts at local elections have been falling in recent years. While the average turnout in the most recent local elections was up on the previous year, it was still only 33%. At the last European Parliamentary election in 1999 the turnout was 24% and there are concerns that the timing of the 2004 European Parliamentary elections so soon (five weeks) after the local council elections could have a negative impact.
- 2.3 Primary legislation would be needed by means of an order to allow the Secretary of State to move the local and GLA elections. The intention is to seek Parliament's approval to this change by introducing a clause in the proposed Local Government Bill requiring the Government to consult on this issue. This consultation paper is intended to fulfil that prospective requirement.
- 2.4 Consideration was given to the possibility of bringing forward the European Parliamentary elections to bring them in line with the local council elections. However, agreement would be needed with all European Union Member States and while there have been recent attempts to change the date, no agreement for change has been reached, therefore this option is not possible.

3 BENEFITS

3.1 The consultation paper identifies the main benefits as follows:-

- it will be more convenient for voters to have to visit the polling station once only;
- it will reduce costs incurred by local authorities, returning officers and political parties in distributing election material, contacting voters, canvassing and holding the polls; and
- those responsible for voter awareness campaigns, particularly the Electoral Commission and local authorities, will be able to concentrate their efforts in increasing awareness of one single election day.

4 PRACTICAL ISSUES

4.1 The consultation paper recognises that there are practical issues that arise as a consequence of a combination of polls, such as counting arrangements, returning officer's responsibilities, funding, committee cycles and information for voters. Amendments would need to be made to provisions regarding the dates when Council annual meetings may be held, the terms of office of those elected, and the holding of by-elections. The change would also affect bodies such as joint authorities, which although not directly elected, are made up of local councillors.

4.2 In cases where parish council elections are planned to coincide with local elections, the consultation paper suggests that these should also be moved to 10 June, subject to any comments made in response to this consultation. Changes in legislation, through the order-making power that is being sought, will be made so that in 2004 parish elections can be combined with the local and European elections. This would be necessary because current provisions under the Representation of the People Act 1985, Section 10, require a parish election to be deferred by at least three weeks in any case where local elections are combined with the European Parliamentary election. Views are sought on the treatment of parish elections in 2004, as a result of the proposed combination of local council and European Parliamentary elections.

5 PILOT VOTING SCHEMES

5.1 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is also considering whether or not to enable proposals for pilot schemes for new and innovative ways of voting at the proposed combined local, GLA and European Parliamentary elections in 2004 as this would require separate changes to primary legislation.

5.2 It is recognised that there are a number of practical difficulties and risks associated with applying pilots to a national election however, it is felt there could be opportunities to add to the experience of new voting methods.

5.3 Whatever is decided in this regard, local authorities will still have the ability to apply for limited pilot schemes in 2004, for example if they are holding a by-election on a different date.

6 WEEKEND VOTING

6.1 Views are also sought on whether weekend voting could be an additional means of encouraging people to vote. At a previous trial in Camden, in the local elections in 2002, voting was made available in the weekend before polling day. A subsequent evaluation by the Electoral Commission found that only 1.1% of the 28.4% who voted did so during the weekend. This may have been due to lack of publicity and the Electoral Commission felt there would be merit in testing voters preference for weekend voting.

6.2 The government recognises that apart from the staffing implications, there are likely to be difficulties in hiring polling stations/count venues at a weekend, and, subsequent higher costs. Therefore, the government does not propose to move to a weekend election in 2004.

7 OFFICER COMMENTS

7.1 Under The District of Rochford (Electoral Changes) Order 2001 there will be all-out parish elections in Hockley, Hullbridge and Rayleigh in 2004 in addition to the local and European elections.

7.2 Should the recommendations of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister be approved by Parliament and the elections combined, there would be the following implications for the administration of these elections:-

- **staffing** – extra staff will be required in the polling stations to ensure the security of the poll when running three elections on the same day. Some electors will not be eligible to vote at all of the elections so care will need to be exercised by polling station staff when stamping and issuing ballot papers and marking the electoral register. Therefore, two Presiding Officers and four poll clerks may be required at polling stations with a large electorate. It could be that the Elections Office will experience difficulty in recruiting experienced staff in those numbers to work on a single day.

Extra staff will also be required at the count to separate and verify ballot papers from three different elections.

- **count** - the counting process will inevitably be more complicated. At present, when two elections are combined, the Parliamentary count is held at close of poll and the secondary election count is held the following day. In the case of a European Parliamentary election, past practice has been to hold the European count on the Sunday following polling day to come into line with our European Union partners and it is assumed that this practice will continue in 2004. In Rochford, the parish count is traditionally commenced at the close of the district count. This is unlikely to be feasible if three sets of elections are combined, given the time taken to separate and verify three sets of ballot papers, plus the time taken to count the district papers. The parish count may have to be undertaken on the next day resulting in a delay in the declaration of the parish results. It could also prove difficult recruiting sufficient staff for three separate counts.
- **costs** – there are likely to be savings in polling station hire as a result of just needing a venue for a single day and the increased staff costs will be partly offset by being shared with funding from the Treasury for the European election. The likelihood of having the parish count on the day following the elections will result in increased costs for the hire of the count station and staff. These costs would normally be borne by the parish councils.

If the parish elections are not to be combined and are instead to be postponed until after 10 June 2004, this will have consequent cost implications for Hockley and Hullbridge Parish Councils and Rayleigh Town Council, in that the full costs of the postponed election and count will devolve onto them instead of being shared with the district council.

- **accounting** – both constituencies in the Rochford District are shared with neighbouring authorities. Rochford and Southend East is shared with Southend Borough Council, which will have a Borough election as well; and Rayleigh constituency is shared with Chelmsford Borough Council which does not have local elections in 2004. The consequent splitting of costs in the elections accounts will be a considerable administrative task .
- **advertising** – whilst it is felt that the Electoral Commission will have a national role in advertising the change of date, should the elections be combined, there will still be costs incurred at local level for advertisements to be placed in local papers. There will also be a statutory requirement upon the Returning Officer to place notices in the polling booths concerning each of the elections taking place, and the number of candidates to vote for at each one, with possible confusion for the voter as some voters will not be eligible to vote in all the elections.

- **administration** – the pressures placed on the staff in the Elections office at a combined election are considerable. If three elections are to be held at once these pressures will inevitably increase (particularly at the nomination period) given the shortened timetable for a European Parliamentary election and the training implications for staff.

There will be three sets of ballot paper proofs (two of which will be multi-choice elections resulting in large numbers of candidates). These will need to be checked, both before and after printing, prior to the issue of postal votes and on filling the ballot boxes.

The number of postal voters has considerably increased following new legislation allowing postal voting on demand. At a three-way combined election, the issue and opening of postal votes will be a complicated task requiring great care, given that some voters will not be eligible to vote at all of the elections. This will require an increased number of staff to attend both issue and opening and this will impact on the various departments of the Council. Also postal votes may be handed in to the polling station now and as they have to be opened at the count that will also contribute to the time taken to reach a result.

- **pilots** – the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, after consultation with the Electoral Commission, has recognised that there are a number of practical difficulties and risks associated with applying innovative voting practices to a national election; not least of which is the need for primary legislation to allow piloting in local elections combined with European Parliamentary elections. However, it is felt that if a local authority wished to conduct a pilot the opportunity should be available to them to add to the body of experience of new voting methods.
- **weekend voting** – given that the government has previously made clear that if weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements it would be necessary to ensure that it took place on both weekend days in order to accommodate the needs for religious observance for all communities, this could have considerable consequences with regard to the hire of polling stations, recruiting of staff and costs. There could also be additional costs in compensation payments for loss of revenue to leisure facilities that were required to cancel other bookings.

As the benefits in terms of turnout have not yet been fully tested, it is not thought that weekend voting should be used for the elections in 2004.

- 7.3 **Parish views** – the views of the parishes of Hockley, Hullbridge and Rayleigh have been sought as they are the ones to be directly affected by this proposal. The responses are set out below:

Hockley Parish Council – the parish clerk has concerns over the possible confusion for voters if the elections are combined.

Hullbridge Parish Council – no objection.

Rayleigh Town Council - will be discussing this at a meeting later in January 2003.

8 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That the views set out in the report, together with any further Member comments, form the basis of the Council's response to the consultation paper. (HAMS)

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Background Papers:

Combining English Local Authority, Greater London Authority and European Parliamentary Elections in 2004 – Consultation paper

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