

16. ELECTORAL MATTERS

Report By: Chief Executive

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To note the outcome of the Electoral Pilot Scheme undertaken at the elections held on 1st May 2003 and receive a report on the issue of two consultation papers by the Electoral Commission.

Electoral Pilot Scheme

1. The Council submitted its proposal to undertake an all-postal pilot, covering all of its 40 wards, at the local elections to be held in May 2003 to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on 26 November 2002. On 18 December, the ODPM approved the Council's pilot scheme bid.
2. The main aspects of the Council's pilot scheme were as follows:
 - a wholly postal election in all 40 wards;
 - no polling stations, with voters given the option of returning their ballot papers to one of a number of specified locations by 5pm on Thursday 1 May 2003;
 - no traditional declaration of identity to be used, but electors required to officially sign the return envelope;
 - a watermark on the ballot paper to enhance security and minimise fraud;
 - a barcode on the return envelope to enable production of a marked register available during and after the election, and to assist in the investigation of any alleged irregularity;
 - votes verified and counted centrally; and
 - efforts made to publicise these arrangements.
3. Ballot papers for 38 of the 40 wards (two of which were uncontested) were issued to the eligible electorate of 130,203 on 16 April 2003 and the Count was held in the traditional manner on 1st May, 2003. Overall turnout was 58.3% with a total of 75,883 ballot papers being returned. This represented a very significant increase on the previous May 2000 turnout of 36.85%. Turnout between wards varied from 47.69% in Belmont ward to 72.53% in Bircher ward.
4. Detailed comparison between the elections held in 2000 and 2003 on a ward by ward basis is difficult as boundary changes since the last election led to changes to all ward boundaries and a reduction in the total number of wards from 44 to 40. However, it is clear that turnout increased in all areas and that this increase was by more than 30% in some areas. No exceptional local issues were reported that would have been expected to have affected voting activity. The Electoral Commission

concluded that It was clear that the all-postal nature of the election contributed significantly to the increase in turnout.

5. The Electoral Commission monitored the Pilot Scheme throughout the election process and noted that the Council had established a small project team to manage the pilot project and that a high-level project plan and task list had been maintained. The Commission concluded that the project had been efficiently managed and the Council's approach ensured that the administrative burden on the Council had been minimised. A copy of the Commission's evaluation report on the pilot scheme is available on request.
6. The Electoral Commission's conclusions, in terms of the five statutory evaluation criteria used to evaluate all of the government approved Pilot Scheme's, were as follows:
 - Given the significant increase in turnout, the Commission believes that all postal voting was successful in facilitating voting.
 - The turnout achieved in all wards was significantly higher than the previous local election, increasing from 36.85% in 2000 to 58.3%.
 - The large increase in turnout for the election and feedback received from parties and the media suggest that the majority of those who participated in the ballot found the new procedures reasonably straightforward, easy to use and understand. The significant number of envelopes returned without the required signature is considered to reflect security concerns rather than a failure to understand the process.
 - The Commission has no evidence to suggest that the pilot scheme led to an increase in impersonation or other malpractice. There is insufficient evidence to judge whether the signing of envelopes (in the absence of a traditional declaration of identity), a watermarked ballot paper and bar-coded return envelopes contributed, in practice, to protecting the integrity of the election.
 - The cost of the pilot election was more than 25% higher than the previous traditional poll in Herefordshire. However, increased costs must be considered in the light of the very significant increase in turnout, and the Commission considers that, at £1.66 per voter, this pilot represents good value for money.

Consultation papers

7. The Electoral Commission has recently issued two consultation papers entitled "Voting Age and Candidacy" and "The Cycle of Local Government Elections in England".
8. The Electoral Commission believes that the time is right to review the current minimum age (18) at which people can take part in elections and the age of candidacy (21). The Commission has therefore published its consultation paper and seeks views on this issue.
9. In January 2003, the Government invited the Electoral Commission to review the cycle of local elections in England and identify options for change that would simplify the current cycle. This consultation process considers elections to principal local

authorities (including mayoral elections), the Greater London Authority and parish councils. In recommending any options for change, the Commission may consider changes to councillors' terms of office, the number of councillors for local authority areas and the number and boundaries of local authority wards and divisions.

Consultation with political group leaders

10. Consultation on electoral reform is a sensitive issue because if such consultation was to be undertaken solely through the Executive there may be a perception that the response could be partisan. The consultation has therefore been conducted through group leaders.
11. In relation to the consultation on "voting age and candidacy" group leaders were unanimous in their support for maintaining the voting age at 18 but lowering the age of candidacy to age 18 also.
12. In relation to the cycle of elections the group leaders noted that the Council had only recently addressed this issue in the context of the Electoral Review, the outcome of which was implemented from the May 2003 elections. There group leaders so no reason to disturb the Council's clearly expressed preference for the continuation of quadrennial elections with the next election being held in May 2007.

RECOMMENDATION

- THAT (a) the Electoral Commission's evaluation report on the Electoral Pilot Scheme for the 1st May, 2003 elections be received and noted; and**
- (b) the Council endorses the proposed response of group leaders to the Electoral Commission's Consultation papers entitled "Voting Age and Candidacy" and "The Cycle of Local Government Elections in England" supporting a minimum voting age and age for candidacy of 18 and re-expressing its support for the continuation of quadrennial elections.**

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None identified.