

RECOVERY OF TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL ELECTION COSTS

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FINANCE

CABINET

9TH SEPTEMBER, 2004

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To review the charges for fees to be levied on parish and town councils at ordinary elections and for casual vacancies.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendations

- THAT (a) The Council's policy on charging parish and town councils to recover election costs, be reaffirmed and that the full cost of elections be charged except when combined elections take place, then only 50% of costs be recharged;**
- (b) An administration charge be made on all parishes for uncontested elections but (subject to the views of HALC) that this charge be based on a per-head of elector cost basis; and**
- (c) HALC be informed of the likely increase in costs that will be incurred at the May 2007 elections and the extra costs if the Government decides that the all-postal ballot method should be used at the local elections in 2007, this information to also include an assessment for uncontested and contested elections and be sent to each parish and town council.**

Reasons

To review the current policy in relation to the recovery of election costs for town and parish councils.

Considerations

1. From time to time and especially when ordinary elections are held every four years, complaints are raised by parish councils at the charges levied on them to pay for the cost of their elections. The May 2003 elections were no exception particularly given its additional unforeseen costs which arose from the all postal pilot. The Herefordshire Association of Parish Councils (HALC) has recently requested that the

Herefordshire Council should re-visit its charging policy. HALC has suggested that the Council should absorb the cost of ordinary parish council elections to be held in May 2007 but that the full cost of any casual vacancy elections held should be paid by the parish concerned in full.

2. The Cabinet, at its meeting on 22nd February, 2001, re-considered the Council's policy introduced in 1998 on charging parish and town councils for elections, and reaffirmed that the full cost of elections should be charged except when combined elections with unitary and/or parliamentary elections take place, then only 50% of costs would be recharged. An administration charge is also made per parish on those councils who have uncontested elections.

CURRENT APPROACH

3. The Council's current policy seeks to recover all costs incurred in running parish and town council elections. The calculation involves taking the total cost per parish for those parishes that hold elections or a particular election. The figure is then divided by the total number of electors in each of the parishes concerned to give a cost figure for each budget head per elector. This figure is then used to calculate individual parish costs. This is an equitable way of calculating the costs and is recommended as the best approach to the issue. It more accurately reflects the difference in costs incurred because the larger parishes have more polling stations, staff costs, etc. Individual parish billing is required because, at the time of ordinary elections as in May 2003, each parish is a separate entity and some group parish councils had a mix of "uncontested" and "contested" elections.
4. An administration charge is also levied on parishes that only hold "uncontested" elections. This currently is £100 per parish save in the case of grouped parish councils where a maximum fee of £250 is charged for those group parish councils with three or more parishes.

PARISH COUNCIL CONSIDERATIONS

5. A number of representations have been received from Parish Clerks that the May 2003 election administration fee of £100 (£250 for grouped councils) for uncontested elections was too great. Even though a parish election may be "uncontested", an election has actually taken place and administrative costs have been incurred.
6. Regardless of how many parish councillors there are to be elected or the number of electors involved, the work undertaken for an uncontested election is the same for each individual parish. Adverts have to be prepared and placed, posters printed and displayed, nomination packs prepared, printed and posted, and candidates queries dealt with. The returned nomination forms have to be checked and processed, candidates advised of decisions and appropriate result notices prepared, printed and displayed. Candidate's election fees packs have to be prepared, printed, posted out and collated on return, even if a nil return is filed. In addition, in May 2003 we also had to include work associated with the statutory administration and registration of the new Model Code of Conduct requirements for parish councillors. This all has an administrative cost to the Council.
7. Several parish councils have proposed that the uncontested election fee for the future should also be a "per capita" approach, i.e. the total cost of uncontested elections should be calculated and then distributed on a per elector approach. This will have the effect of a more equitable spread of costs and is recommended but it will mean that larger parishes may pay more than the current £100.

8. The May 2007 election costs for parishes are likely to increase quite considerably if an all-postal ballot method is used and it may be prudent if parish councils consider recovering this cost over their next two/three years parish precepts. It would also be sensible for parish clerks to ensure that their annual parish precepts should also include a provision to cover the cost of a by-election should a casual vacancy occur in their parish prior to the next ordinary day of election in May 2007. These matters are under discussion with HALC with a view to providing advice to each council.
9. There is certainly a need for parish councils to make their own assessment of election costs and to reflect this in their precepts. To this end each Parish Clerk will be informed of the likely increase in costs that will be incurred at election time because of the likelihood the Government may decide on the use of an all-postal ballot method at the local elections in 2007. This should also include the cost if traditional methods are used together with an assessment for uncontested and contested elections.

Alternative Options

The Council could agree to the request of HALC and absorb the parish council election costs, estimated to be in the region of £50,000/60,000.

Risk Management

There is a risk to the Council's finances if an agreed formula for charging is not in place with an attendant risk of some councils not paying.

Consultees

Herefordshire Association of Local Councils.

Individual parish council clerks.

Background Papers

None identified.