

Wiltshire Council

Full Council

21 February 2023

Item 10 – Budget 2023/24 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 - 2025/26

From Colin Gale, Chairman Rushall Parish Council

To Cllr Ashley O'Neill - Cabinet Member for Governance, IT, Broadband, Digital, Licensing, Staffing, Communities, and Area Boards

Statement

RE: TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL FOUR-YEARLY ELECTION CYCLE COSTS

References:

- A. Wiltshire Council email Director Legal and Governance/Monitoring Officer dated 9th January 2023
- B. Rushall PC letter of objection dated 29th January 2021.

Rushall Parish Council (RPC) strongly object to Wiltshire Councils declared intent to introduce the recovery of costs from Town and Parish Councils for the local elections starting in May 2025, reference A. This is a resurrection of Wiltshire Councils previous declaration of intent declared in 2021 which was subsequently withdrawn following parish complaints, reference B. RPC have initially formally declared there objection to Wiltshire Council Cabinet Meeting dated 31st January 2023.

RPC disagree with the Wiltshire Council response and believe the proposed decision to withdraw payment of local election costs by Wiltshire Council and directly charge Town, City & Parish Councils for local election costs is a 'Key Decision' as it is a total withdrawal of a service provided by Wiltshire Council. This change is not financially neutral as there will be a financial reduction to Wiltshire Council, a financial increase to the Town /Parish Councils and new financial costs to Wiltshire Council to invoice and recover the costs from the Town/Parish Councils. Effectively this proposed financial change to the local election service is a double charge to the 'electorate' who currently already pay for the local election services within their council taxes and now it is proposed that the electorate should pay again within precept charges. RPC also would have expected that a decision of this nature would have warranted a formal level of consultation with the Town, City & Parish Councils rather than just a stealthy like declaration of intent by Wiltshire Council to implement the change?

It is not clear from the costs identified in the email how much RPC might be expected to pay for their parish element of the overall elections as there are only indicative costs for uncontested elections and contested elections. It is also highlighted that these indicative costs are subject to inflation when implemented in 2025. The

indicative costs are further caveated because of the inability to predict the number of elections that may be held in any 4 year period.

RPC is a small parish and assuming worst case these costs could represent as much as 14% plus of the current parish precept if applied to one year. The email recognizes the financial impact on smaller parishes and the need to smooth the financial impact but Wiltshire Council has let this issue drift for 2 years since the original declaration in January 2021. It should be noted that precept budgets have already been set for 2023/24 by the time this notification was sent by Wiltshire Council. Offering to smooth the impact post 2025 puts parishes always on the back-foot with respect to planning for subsequent elections.

The Cabinet Officer response also advised that the clerks had been briefed by the Monitoring Officer in November 2022 and feedback welcomed. The following is the notes of the online 'Chit Chat' session:

"Wiltshire Council has been undertaking detailed budget discussions across all areas of the business. The costs of delivering elections has been held by Wiltshire Council and early discussions with Councillors have indicated that this is likely to change. We appreciate this is a challenging message but are keen to ensure that councils have plenty of notice to effectively plan and precept. Perry will imminently be writing out to all town and parish councils with further information and an indication of what the respective election costs are".

RPC consider it a stretch by any ones imagination to consider that the identification to parish clerks of internal WC discussions is a formal notification to parishes of such a significant change. It should also be noted that the notes also recognize that Wiltshire Council themselves recognize that the change is a withdrawal of a service ie 'The costs of delivering elections'.

Question P23-03

- a) Since this is a withdrawal of a service provided by Wiltshire Council and is a 'Key Decision' will Wiltshire Council now reclassify the decision and advise what corrective actions they will take?

Response

The council is not proposing to withdraw a service; it is proposing to introduce a charge for the service. The introduction of those charges from 2025 is a decision for Full Council within the broad matter of approval of the budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy, not an executive and therefore "key" decision. Please also refer to the response to Question 22-326 answered at [Cabinet on 31 January 2023](#).

- b) Why has there not been any consultation with the Town, City and Parish Councils especially via the Area Boards which is the appropriate forum for this kind of proposal. Can Wiltshire Council confirm that consultation action will be introduced if this proposal is going to proceed?

Response

Please refer to the response to Question 22-326 answered at [Cabinet on 31 January 2023](#). There is no statutory requirement for consultation regarding this recommendation to Council. However, Town, City and Parish councils were briefed via their clerks by the Monitoring Officer in November 2022 and feedback welcomed. The Monitoring Officer subsequently wrote to all councils and invited questions in early January. The Council has responded to a number of queries on this issue.

Question P23-04

Has Wiltshire Council considered the impact on democracy if this proposal is introduced and the possibility that small parishes may decide to avoid the election charges by not taking part in local elections?

Response

We have been liaising with two comparator councils, Cornwall and Durham who implemented these changes some time ago. They assured us that there was not greater use of co-option or uncontested elections as a result of the changes. Concerns about the impact on democracy are therefore not borne out elsewhere.