

PROPOSED RESPONSE TO DCLG RE COMBINING LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

1. Do you believe that 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?

Deferring the elections to the new unitary authority to June 2009 will mean that the IE will be responsible for preparing the transition to the new unitary authority and the residual functions of District Councils that are abolished, for a longer period of time. Specifically we will need to plan for how we will deal with development control and licensing applications received on or after 1 April 2009 with potentially only the IE having the locus to respond.

Elections in early June will mean that the first meeting of the new council will not take place until mid-June where committees will be appointed. Training will however need to be provided to members before they can consider licensing or development control applications. This may mean that development control and licensing activity may stall between 1 April and 1 July 2009. There are of course statutory timescales which have to be met in determining these applications and any assistance that the DCLG can give in increasing these turnaround times for the transitional period would be helpful.

Also this would mean that there will be a longer period of time during which there will only be county councillors and those DC members serving on the IE to meet the constituency needs of all the residents of Wiltshire – this will lead to an increased workload of county councillors in relation to responding to constituents enquiries during the difficult transitional period and in the busy period of the run up to the elections.

Another factor is that service on outside bodies to whom DC members are appointed would also have vacancies for longer periods.

On the other hand, moving local elections to June will allow an additional four weeks for the new combined election service within the new council to plan, and also to apply the results of the boundary review. It will be easier to recruit staff for polling stations and counts etc and it will be cheaper to run in combination (provided there are no stand alone parish elections) – halving staff and premises costs and some postage costs could lead to savings approaching £200k.

The combination of the elections will also drive up turnout for the European elections.

Operationally on the downside there is the potential for voter confusion. When combining local with European Parliamentary elections this would combine a first past the post election with a proportional representation election with different instructions. Sheer volume of postal votes may also become difficult to control. Postal voting was identified as the biggest single problem. The first test for the new authority will be more complicated than stand alone unitary elections.

On balance, from an operational point of view, it would be marginally easier to run a combined election than two elections four weeks apart, provided there are no parish elections.

2. If we move the elections to principal authorities should we also move the date of the parish council elections where they are scheduled to take place on 7 May 2009?

Consultations have taken place and the overwhelming responses favour the proposed deferral of parish and town council elections until 2013. The councils feel that this would give continuity through the transition process and the best interests of the electorate would be served by having stable local councils. There was also a widespread feeling that there was no appetite for further elections so close to the last set and that they would be wasteful of resources in that most seats would be uncontested.

If there are to be parish elections in 2009 in Wiltshire we would rather see parish and unitary in May with stand alone European Parliamentary elections in June.

Traditionally, if three tiers of election have fallen on the same day, the parish tier has been delayed until three weeks after the other two. By that stage of the summer we would start to run up against staff being on holiday. This could also result in stand alone parish elections in 2009 – the most expensive option and an outcome nobody will wish to see.

3. What practical issues do you foresee in combining effectively local (and where applicable, parish) elections with the European Parliamentary Elections?

The biggest single problem will be postal voting: If we have separate issues of postal votes we are accused of waste by voters. There are logistical problems too with having to double the amount of postal vote packs in the system. Voters completing postal votes will have approximately 30 possible combinations; this would increase to approximately 90 possible combinations if parish papers were added in as well.

Another issue is that local printers do not hold vast quantities of envelopes. Each postal vote requires three envelopes – a combined

election will need somewhere between 270,000 and 410,000 envelopes. Two thirds of those will require a bespoke purple colouring on two corners which not all suppliers can provide.

4. What action do you think should be taken to address these practical issues (whether by local authorities, Government or Electoral Commission)?

Very early decisions need to be taken so that electoral administrators know what they are planning for. Relevant legislation will need to be in place early enough as well. Relevant statutes which provide the detail of combination and fees until a few weeks before the elections for example will need to be issued in time.

Authorities, Government and the EC could help by not only accepting that Friday counts can be beneficial, but actively encouraging them.