

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

2 February 2021

Subject: **Town and Parish Council four-yearly election cycle costs**

Cabinet Member: **Cllr Richard Clewer – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts & Tourism, Housing and Communities**

Key Decision: **Non Key**

Executive Summary

As part of the transformation to become a unitary authority in 2009, Wiltshire Council made the decision to absorb the costs of all town and parish scheduled four-yearly elections and by-elections. In April 2015, this decision was reversed for by-elections only so that town and parish councils are recharged for costs incurred. The exception to this is that if the town/parish council by-election is combined with a unitary divisions by-election held on the same day, the costs are borne by Wiltshire Council.

There are 307 town/parish council elections which is higher than the number of actual towns and parishes because some of the towns/parishes are warded. They could all, potentially, be contested for the May 2021 elections. However, for the 2013 and 2017 elections, there were actually 69 and 72 contested town/town ward or parish/parish ward elections respectively.

Consideration should be given on whether the Council wishes to continue to absorb the costs incurred for the relevant town/parish elections in the current financial climate and with the added costs of Covid-19 requirements, or to recharge them to the relevant town/parish councils.

As the costs have always been absorbed by Wiltshire Council, there has never been a split of costs between unitary and town/parish elections. It is therefore difficult to estimate the exact costs town/parish may incur. Some costs can be shared equally between the election types and some are specific to the parish i.e. ballot papers and therefore the parish would be charged 100%.

As town/parish councils will already have set their precepts for 2021-2022, consideration should be given to deferring payment until 2022-2023 should the decision be made to recharge town/parish councils. In addition, payment could be spread over the balance of the election cycle period.

Proposal(s)

Cabinet is asked to recommend Council:

- a. To agree that the costs of town and parish council four yearly cycle elections are apportioned to town and parish councils for the May 2021 local elections and thereafter in accordance with the apportionment criteria in Appendix A;
- b. Subject to agreement of a. above, to agree that town and parish councils may defer payment of the election recharges incurred to 2022/23 and pay the amount due over the remaining part of the election cycle period; thereafter payment may be made over the full four year election cycle.
- c. To agree to apportion costs in accordance with the same criteria for town and parish by-elections when combined with a unitary council by-election.

Reason for Proposal(s)

The decision to absorb the four-yearly election costs incurred by town/parish councils was made almost 12 years ago. In the current financial climate and with the added costs to be incurred for the elections to meet Central Government's Covid-19 guidelines, it is appropriate that this policy is reviewed by Council.

**Terence Herbert
Chief Executive**

Wiltshire Council

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Cabinet Member: **Cllr Richard Clewer – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts & Tourism, Housing and Communities**

Key Decision: **Non Key**

Purpose of Report

1. To consider whether to continue to uphold the 2009 decision for Wiltshire Council to absorb town/parish council four-yearly election costs or to reverse the decision and recharge town/parish elections effective for the May 2021 elections.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The option to recharge town/parish councils meets the Council's business plan priorities of working with partners in an innovative and effective way having regard to the current economic climate and the competing business plan priorities of the Council.

Background

3. As part of the transformation to become a unitary authority in 2009, Wiltshire Council made the decision to absorb the costs of all town and parish scheduled four yearly elections and by-elections.
4. In 2015 this policy was reviewed with the result that town and parish councils would cover the cost of by-elections and parish polls. However, where a town or parish council election (but not a parish poll) coincided with a unitary council election, Wiltshire Council would continue to meet the full costs.
5. The policy also advised that where a building was owned by the town/parish council and was hired for the town/parish election, the hire charge would be waived.
6. The scheduled four yearly cycle for towns and parishes is complex in that there are 307 town/town ward and parish/parish ward elections running on the same day alongside 98 unitary division elections. In May 2021, the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections, which were postponed from May 2020 due to the Covid-19 virus, will also be held on the same day.

7. In addition to the elections listed above for May 2021, there will be approximately 20-25 neighbourhood planning referendums (NPRs) that will be held on the same day. The NPRs were either postponed this year or would have been scheduled to take place during 2020 and up to May 2021. In accordance with the legislation enacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, they must be held on 6 May 2021.
8. There are a total of 2118 town and parish council seats to fill which involves receipt of around 2000-2500 nomination papers in a limited timescale. This creates a huge amount of work to ensure the nomination complies with legislative requirements and that the information is accurately recorded. There are numerous quality checks and proof checks undertaken as accuracy is paramount for the publication of statutory notices and ballot papers.
9. There is potential that all the town/parish election areas could be contested which would require 307 different ballot papers. However, for the 2013 and 2017 elections, there were actually 69 and 72 contested town/town ward or parish/parish ward elections respectively.
10. The remaining uncontested elections will still incur limited costs and staff time for nomination processing, producing statutory notices and cancelling any arrangements no longer required, which is a cost that is currently absorbed by Wiltshire Council. Further costs will be incurred if there are insufficient or no nominations for a town or parish council as they will be inquorate, and the election would need to be re-run.
11. The costs involved in running the four yearly cycle elections are substantial because of the number of elections that are held, and the complexities of which areas are contested or uncontested. The costs have never been recorded separately between unitary and parish elections, but the overall costs for the May 2017 elections was around £1,030,000. The costs are expected to increase for May 2021, but it is impossible to estimate what the increase will be. Factors to consider are: the assumption that more electors will apply for postal voting, therefore increasing printing and postage costs; any adaptations, extra supplies i.e. hand gel to meet Government Covid-19 requirements and safety guidelines for polling stations and count venues; possible deep cleaning of venues; counts held over a number of days incurring increased hire charges, security and staffing costs.

Main Considerations for the Council

12. This report should be read in conjunction with the report on the Returning Officer's proposed scale of fees and charges for 2021.
13. Many of the costs incurred for the four yearly cycle can be apportioned equally between Wiltshire Council and the town and parish councils (and, for 2021, the PCC elections) because they are a shared cost, such as polling station hire and polling staff costs. However, there are some costs that solely apply to the individual town/parish as they are specific to them, for example nominations,

ballot papers, postal votes, and counting sheets. Further information on the apportionment criteria is provided in Appendix A.

14. For May 2021, it is likely that where a town or parish area is contested, there will be at least one other election type also taking place on that day. This means that where costs can be shared (i.e. they are not specific to the town or parish) town/parishes will only incur 50% of the cost if there are two elections, 33% if there are three elections and so forth.
15. There could be potentially up to four different elections taking place in some town or parish areas: PCC, unitary, parish and NPR. On this basis, some costs incurred will be apportioned between the four election types, meaning the parish will only be liable for 25% of those costs.
16. The shared portion of the costs and the full PCC specific only costs incurred for the PCC elections can be reclaimed from Central Government Cabinet Office.
17. The costs of the NPR referendums are recharged internally to Development Management, as they receive limited funding for the NPR process as a whole which includes running the referendum.
18. Parish councils may consider charging for the use of their venues for polling stations where there is a combined election.
19. The method for the counting of votes for many of the town/town wards and parish/parish wards is different from unitary elections in that voters are required to vote for more than one candidate because there are multiple seats. This involves training staff on this counting method and requires another format of calculating the votes, usually by way of counting sheets that are produced and printed specifically for each town/town ward or parish/parish ward election. The count is therefore specific to the individual town and parish council and, as such, the costs incurred would be fully recharged to the town or parish.
20. The cost of holding an election may be a factor in deterring candidates from putting themselves forward, but having consulted the Electoral Commission, Association of Electoral Administrators and councils who already apportion costs (such as Swindon Borough Council and Cornwall Council), there is no conclusive evidence that this is the case; this is likely to be a local and subjective matter. Parish councils have no legal power to decide who may request an election or who may wish to stand.
21. Parishes will have set their precept for 2020/2021. Consideration should therefore be given to deferring payment for the four-year cycle elections until 2022/23 so town/parishes can make provision to include it within their 2022/23 precept. In addition payment of the amount due could be spread over the balance of the election cycle period.
22. Each town or parish area is unique in its electoral make up, therefore, it is difficult to give an exact costing per town/town ward or parish/parish ward. Factors which affect this are:
 - differing electorate sizes within each electoral area;

- varying numbers of polling stations;
 - varying numbers of postal votes issued and subsequently returned;
 - postage costs;
 - number of council seats;
 - number of candidates that will stand;
 - length of ballot paper.
23. Appendix B illustrates three different parish examples of estimated costs and their respective apportionments. This is dependent upon how many types of election take place on the same day within that town/town ward or parish/parish ward area. Appendix C gives an indication of costs where an election is uncontested. The fees for this purpose are based on the proposed Returning Officer's scale of fees and charges 2021, which is the subject of a separate report on this agenda.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

24. Arrangements will be made for Overview and Scrutiny to be briefed on this matter as required.

Safeguarding Implications

25. There are no safeguarding implications

Public Health Implications

26. There are no public health implications.

Procurement Implications

27. There are no procurement implications.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

28. There is no equalities impact.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

29. There is no environmental and climate change impact.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

30. Wiltshire Council will continue to be liable to meet all election costs which will impact on its finances.

31. Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

32. Town/Parish Councils may not be able to pay for the costs as precepts will have already been set for 2021-2022. This may be overcome by allowing the costs to be deferred until 2022-2023 and allowing payment to be spread over the election cycle period.

Financial Implications

33. Wiltshire Council cannot continue to absorb Town and Parish Council election costs. It is recommended that actual costs are recharged to Town and Parish Councils and costs spread over the four year election cycle.
34. As precepts for 21/22 have already been set, for this cycle it is recommended that payment is deferred to 22/23 and then spread over the rest of the four year election cycle.
35. The tables below show the total indicative estimated costs and the recharge cost if deferred to 22/23 and spread over the election cycle:

Electorate per Town/Parish or Town/Parish ward area	Estimated Uncontested Elections Total Cost	Estimated Recharge Amount over Election Cycle if Deferred to 22/23
up to 1,000	£190	£63
1,001-2,000	£290	£97
2,001 to 3,000	£390	£130
3,001-4,000	£490	£163
4,001 5,000	£590	£197

	Estimated Total Cost			Estimated Recharge Amount over Election Cycle if Deferred to 22/23		
	Large Parish	Medium Parish	Small Parish	Large Parish	Medium Parish	Small Parish
Standalone election	£11,805	£8,984	£6,939	£3,935	£2,995	£2,313
Combined with 1 other election	£11,140	£8,471	£6,583	£3,713	£2,824	£2,194
Combined with 2 other elections	£10,624	£8,130	£6,331	£3,541	£2,710	£2,110
Combined with 3 other elections	£10,365	£7,939	£6,212	£3,455	£2,646	£2,071

Legal Implications

36. Section 36(5) Representation of the People Act 1983 provides that all expenditure properly incurred by a returning officer in relation to the holding of an election of a parish is repaid by the town/parish council for which the election is held, if the principal council so requires.

Workforce Implications

37. There are no workforce implications.

Options Considered

38. None

Conclusions

39. There will be increased costs for the May 2021 elections because of the need to meet Covid-19 safety requirements and an expected increase in postal voting.
40. As there will be combined elections in May 2021, a significant part of the costs can be shared between the various election types. This means that town/parish councils would only be liable to meet the cost of a percentage of the shared costs and the full cost for costs which are specific to their electoral area i.e. ballot papers.
41. The Council should decide whether in the current financial climate it should continue to absorb the town/parish costs or whether these should be apportioned on the basis proposed in this report.

**Terence Herbert
Chief Executive**

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Appendices

Appendix A - apportionment of costs
Appendix B - indicative costs - contested
Appendix C – indicative costs - uncontested

Background Papers

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None