



Committee and date

Council  
5 November 2009  
10.00 am

Item

9

## PROPOSED ELECTORAL FEES FOR PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

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### 1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to determine a replacement policy for recharging parish/town councils the cost of local elections following local government reorganisation.

### 2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Cabinet recommends:

- A that a policy of recharging parish/town councils election costs at a rate of £2.00 per elector or at actual cost, whichever is the lesser, be introduced on a trial basis with effect from 1 April 2010.
- B that any costs incurred be deferred to the following financial year to enable the parishes/towns concerned to precept for the appropriate amounts.
- C that at any combined election involving the parish/town councils they will only be required to pay the additional costs which relate solely to their elections.
- D that the policy be reviewed after 18 months operation

## REPORT

### 3. Background

- 3.1 In advance of local government reorganisation, the former County Council received a report on electoral arrangements post 1 April 2009. This included consideration of the levying of fees and charges for parish/town council elections by the new unitary Council. However, Members felt that parish/town councils had not been given sufficient time to consider the consultation draft, given the frequency of parish and town council meetings. The matter was then deferred on the understanding that the new council would bear all parish and town council election costs during the 2009/10 financial year.
- 3.2 The need for a new policy stems from the fact that each of the former district/borough councils had their own individual arrangements for recovering election costs from the parishes/towns within their area. In the main they aimed to recover the cost of elections with the exception of South Shropshire which imposed a cost ceiling related to the number of electors on the register for the area in question. In addition, Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council allowed the parishes within its area to defer payment to the following financial year so they knew how much to precept for. With the exception of these differences, the five District/Borough Councils acted similarly, including sharing the cost of combined local government polls with their respective parishes at the four yearly elections.
- 3.3 However, in recent years, there have been relatively few parish/town council elections. The tendency has been for parishes/towns to submit either the exact number of candidates to fill all of the vacancies, or just enough to ensure that the body is a quorate. Resulting vacancies are then filled by co-opting local people, so genuine polls are rare in many of the 200 parishes. Consequently, the issue of fees and charges does not really affect the vast majority of parish councils across the county.

### 4. Original Suggestion

- 4.1 The original proposal put to the Council was set by reference to the level of charges which applied in the north of the county until 31 March 2009. It was based on an electorate of 2000 people so therefore exaggerated the true cost for most parishes, as almost half of the parishes in Shropshire have an electorate of less than 400.
- 4.2 But, despite the reality that the majority of parishes would only be required to pay the recommended £100 fee for an uncontested election every four years, concern was expressed at the level of the proposed charges on grounds of cost for the following reasons:-
- The disproportionate effect that the introduction of a universal charging structure could have on small rural parish councils, particularly those in a group situation, because of the potential for them to be charged multiple fees.

- The impact that a universal charging structure could have on those parishes (predominately in the south of the county) which have previously benefited from the application of a cost ceiling based on a maximum charge per elector.
- The loss of the ability to defer the cost of an election to the following financial year, as applied by Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council.

4.3 These objections, either singularly or in combination, have been held out as reasons why local people would not want to call an election and thus are seen as obstacles to democracy. Best practice in this area suggests that all local councils should include a contingency sum for elections in their annual estimates. However, for a variety of reasons few do at present.

## **5. Feedback from the Parish/Town Councils**

5.1 As can be seen from the comments of the parishes/towns listed in Appendix A, that have responded to the consultation, the majority are concerned principally with cost issues. Some want to limit the cost by reference to the number of electors, while others want to have the cost deferred to the following financial year.

5.2 These views were reinforced at a recent meeting at which approximately a quarter of the county's parish and town councils were present. It was also suggested during discussion that the Council should only recharge those costs which were particular to the parish or town ward elections at the all out elections in 2013.

## **6. Election Costs**

6.1 Clearly, there are numerous options available to the Council in this area. For example the Council could:-

- (i) Continue to meet the full cost indefinitely, or
- (ii) set a cost ceiling by fixing a maximum amount per elector, or
- (iii) recharge the full cost, either within the relevant, or the following, financial year.

6.2 Another option would be for the parish/town councils to meet only the additional costs particular to the parish/town ward whenever a parish/town election is combined with a unitary or national poll.

6.3 While it is difficult to predict the number of elections in any year, in the current year there were 43 declared vacancies for parish/town councillors between 1 April and 1 October 2009. Seven of these have resulted in the unopposed election of the candidate and a further four have resulted in a poll. The remaining vacancies have been filled by cooption. If this can be regarded as a typical year, it points to the Council needing to administer approximately 8

contested parish/town council elections a year on average, other than at the four yearly elections.

- 6.4 The costs in the first 6 months totals £5,000. Assuming that events will continue in the same manner, the annual cost would therefore double. However, the full financial impact depends on whether the Council seeks to recover some or all of these costs. If a cost sharing policy based on a contribution per elector is introduced to assist the smaller parishes, the total cost could be contained at approx £5,000 p.a. based on the assumption of 8 contests. But this position could vary considerably at the all out elections for the parish and town councils in 2013.

## **7.0 Options for the Future**

- 7.1 Of the numerous options available, the simplicity of setting a maximum cost per elector makes it the most attractive. However, even with a cost of £2.00 per elector, it is unlikely that any parish/ward with an electorate of less than 480 (about 50%) will be able to cover the costs incurred. The Council will be required to subsidise the cost. Also, parishes/towns with larger electorates could be asked to over-pay unless the policy is modified to limit the recharge to the actual cost of the election.
- 7.2 It is difficult to predict whether the number of contested elections in any year will relate mainly to large or small councils. But, if half of them to related to small councils of, say, 200 electors the shortfall is estimated at approx £2,500 p.a.
- 7.3 One approach would be for this Council to offer this level of financial support to the smaller parishes on a trial basis so that the full impact could be established. In addition the policy could also be applied to the larger towns and parishes, with the proviso that the amount recharged is limited to the actual cost where this is less. And, if the recharges were to be deferred to the following year, all councils would then have the opportunity to include that cost in their precept.

## **8. Summary**

- 8.1 On balance, and after taking account of the comments received, it would appear that many local councils will support the introduction of a policy which fixes the level of the recharge at a reasonable cost per elector, or at actual cost, which ever is the lesser.
- 8.2 The policy would be even more palatable if the recharge was limited to the parish/town's specific costs at combined elections, particularly if the recharge was deferred to the following financial year.
- 8.3 The Cabinet is requested to determine whether it wishes to introduce such a policy on a trial basis for 18 months, bearing in mind the full cost which is estimated at £5,000 p.a.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

**Human Rights Act Appraisal**

This report is consistent with the Human Rights Act 1998

**Environmental Appraisal**

**Risk Management Appraisal**

**Community / Consultations Appraisal**

**Cabinet Member**

**Keith Barrow and Peter Nutting**

**Local Member**

All

**Appendices:**