

Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 28 August 2008

**Report of: Constitution and Member Services
Standing Scrutiny Panel**

**Subject: Government Consultation Document - Moving
the Date of the Local Elections to the Same Date as European Elections**

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Recommendations:

- (1) That this Council supports the Government's proposals as outlined in the consultation document for deferring the date of the 2009 County Council elections until 4 June 2009, the same day as the election to the European Parliament subject to the following conditions:**
 - (a) clarification of the requirement for 2 separate poll cards;**
 - (b) advice to Returning Officers on ways in which the ballots for the two elections should be kept separate including distinctively coloured ballot papers;**
 - (c) advice to Returning Officers on how to avoid confusion among voters concerning the two kinds of ballots which was seen at the 2007 elections to the Scottish Parliament;**
 - (d) the importance of prior publicity aimed at voters; and**
 - (e) clear advice on the position of foreign nationals resident in the U.K.**
- (2) That the Government consultation document on weekend voting be considered by the Scrutiny Panel.**

Report:

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1. The Government has published a consultation document on the desirability of synchronising the County and European elections in 2009. Under the Government's plan, both elections would be held on 4 June 2009, which would necessitate the County Council elections being deferred from 7 May 2009.
 2. Consultation is necessary because it would be necessary to facilitate the change by making new regulations.
 3. We have received the arguments for this proposal which are set out in paragraphs 8-14 of the document. Some reservations about the idea are set out in paragraphs

19-25. Reference to the practical issues involved are also highlighted in the document. This approach was followed in 2004 when District and Parish elections were deferred and held on the same day as the European elections on 10 June 2004. Concurrent elections are a regular occurrence in this District and although leading to more complexity, offer economies of scale which are favoured by Government.

4. As a result of the views of Councillors being sought, one member of Council has responded to an earlier item in the Council Bulletin, namely Councillor S Murray. He has commented as follows:

“I am very much against this as I feel both sets of elections are different and should not be confused in any way in the minds of the electorate.

Local elections should remain just that - local and not be held on the same day as national elections.

The main motivation is to try and bolster turn out for the European elections – this should not be done in my view at the expense of distinct and separate local elections.

Please pass on my views to the Panel”.

5. We were not unanimous in our response to these proposals. Three members were opposed to the two elections being held together. They felt that the County Council election would be overshadowed by the European. Indeed they expressed the view that these elections, if held separately, should be much further apart to avoid voter apathy.
6. The majority of the Panel supported the idea but with reservations about the practical issues involved. We have listed those points in recommendation (1) above. Councillors on both sides of the debate were concerned about the experience in the last elections to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliamentary election, like the European, is completely different to the local government poll. Both use the "list" system of multiple choices for voters. Unfamiliarity with this and confusion over how to vote has resulted in a major inquiry into the Scottish election.
7. We hope that publicity, guidance to Returning Officers and the organisation of voting will make a clear distinction between the two ballots to avoid these problems re-occurring.
8. The deadline for comments was 11 August 2008. We have advised the Government that the Council will not be able to respond until after this meeting.
9. We were advised that further Government consultation would be launched in the near future. This relates to moving elections to weekend. We plan to consider this proposal at our September meeting.
10. We recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.