

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL

24 JUNE 2009

**REPORT OF CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

Report prepared by Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager

1. WHOLE AND PARTIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS REVIEW

1.1 Issue for Decision

1.1.1 To consider the report of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee with regard to whole and partial council elections, as attached at **Appendix A**.

1.2 Recommendation of Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1.2.1 That Council reviews the report of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and makes a decision as to whether or not to go out to consultation on implementing whole council elections.

1.2.2 That improving voter turnout be reviewed by the Council.

1.2.3 That, as set out within Section 53 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, if the election cycle changes, Parish Council elections be held at the same time as Local Council elections.

1.2.4 That Council reviews this report and agrees whether single member wards would be desirable, and subject to the Council's decision on whether to move to whole Council elections, a request should be made to the Boundary Commission, as outlined within Section 55 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

1.3.1 Whole Council Elections

1.3.1.1 At the meeting of Maidstone Borough Council on 27 February 2008, Councillor Mrs Stockell put forward the following motion:

"Following on from the previous questions on the issue of having whole Council elections and the obvious support at that time from Councillors, Members were advised by the Chief Executive that this could not be feasibly introduced until 2009.

I would therefore formally propose that this Council agrees, in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in

Health Act 2007, to consult all interested parties on the introduction of whole Council elections for Maidstone.”

This motion was carried and the Democratic Services Manager was tasked with investigating the potential for the Council to move to whole Council elections.

- 1.3.1.2 If Members decide, on the basis of this report, not to go out to consultation, this decision will override the original decision to consult as taken on 27 February 2008.

However, if consultation goes ahead, following this a special meeting of the Council would need to be called to consider whether to move to whole Council elections. The resolution would need to be passed by a majority of at least two thirds of voting Members. For the Council to move to whole Council elections, it must take the decision by 31 December 2010 for implementation in 2011.

- 1.3.1.3 Members of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that before consultation was carried out with residents and other interested parties, it would be worthwhile compiling evidence for and against whole and partial council elections. This would allow both Members and consultees to make an informed decision on which method would be most appropriate for Maidstone. The report of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee therefore does not offer a view as to which option would be most appropriate for Maidstone; this is a decision for all Members to take for themselves having considered the evidence put forward.

- 1.3.1.4 Evidence in favour of whole and partial Council elections is summarised in the table below and covered in more detail within the report:

Benefits for:	Whole Council Elections	Partial Council Elections
Electorate	<p>Simplification of electoral process.</p> <p>Electoral equality (some residents currently elect Borough Councillors 3 out of every 4 years whilst others only get one opportunity every 4 years).</p> <p>Greater opportunity to influence the political make up of the Council.</p>	<p>Political make up of the Council should reflect more sensitively the changing views of the electorate where elections take place by thirds.</p> <p>Greater accountability as councillors are required to engage with the electorate and defend their decisions on a more regular basis.</p>
Politicians	<p>Greater opportunity to organise campaigns and develop detailed manifestos.</p> <p>Greater period of time for</p>	<p>Mix of new and experienced councillors, allowing for efficient councillor teams and capacity building.</p>

	<p>the ruling party to fulfil its manifesto promises.</p> <p>Only campaigning once every 4 years reduces chance of candidates and supporters losing interest in the campaigning process.</p>	<p>Less candidates need to be found to stand at elections, reducing the chance of seats being uncontested.</p> <p>Require less resources when campaigning as candidates and supporters do not have to cover the whole Borough – beneficial for smaller parties.</p>
Council/officers	<p>Political stability encouraging more complex decisions to be made, which might be put off where elections are held most years.</p> <p>Less time in total over the four years is dedicated to the election process, meaning less time during which the Council is not fully functional.</p> <p>Opportunity to plan longer-term.</p> <p>Greater opportunity to build up relationships between officers and Cabinet Members.</p> <p>Financial savings of approximately £12,500 per year.</p> <p>More time for elections team between elections to carry out other tasks, e.g. democratic engagement.</p>	<p>Less opportunity for complete reversals of policy every 4 years.</p> <p>Electing by thirds results in less public enquiries to the Council during the election period and less disruption to Council work than during the election period for whole Council elections.</p> <p>Maintenance of knowledge within the elections team.</p> <p>By-elections are less likely to occur.</p> <p>Election count less complex, allowing it to take place on the night of the election and requiring less training of staff each time.</p>

1.3.1.5 The 2003 Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Elections Centre document, "Electoral Cycles in English Local Government", considered the implications of the frequency of elections on the electorate's voting behaviour. The paper concluded that electoral frequency and the proportion of Members elected were only two factors in a wide range of factors influencing voter turnout, and it was problematic to predict to what extent a change to voting frequency would affect levels of electoral

participation. Furthermore, the report indicated that while alterations to the voting system could lead to an initial increase in voter turnout, this increase may not persist once the novelty of the change has faded.

- 1.3.1.6 This statement was rejected by the Electoral Commission in its 2003 report "The Cycle of Local Government Elections in England", which argued:

"The balance of evidence suggests that local government electors are less likely to participate in the democratic process in areas that hold elections by thirds".

1.3.2 **Consultation**

- 1.3.2.1 While Section 33 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 states that "the council must not pass the resolution [on moving to whole council elections] unless it has taken reasonable steps to consult such persons as it thinks appropriate on the proposed change", there is no guidance on what "reasonable steps" or "appropriate persons" are considered to be. A number of options have therefore been considered, with budgets for consultation ranging from approximately £700 to include a consultation flyer with electoral registration forms (to be sent out in August), to £6000-£10,000 to consult using a range of more in-depth mechanisms to consult with residents, political parties and other key stakeholders.

1.3.3 **Voter Turnout**

- 1.3.3.1 As outlined at section 1.3.1.5, a wide range of factors impacts upon voter turnout. The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the improvement of voter turnout to be vital to ensuring that the Council adequately represents Maidstone's residents, regardless of electoral cycle, therefore the Council is asked to review methods of improving voter turnout.

1.3.4 **Parish Council Elections**

- 1.3.4.1 Currently, Parish Council elections are held at the same time as ward elections which allows residents to vote for their Parish Councillors at the same time as their Borough Councillor. This is also cost effective, as Maidstone Borough Council covers the cost of parish elections held simultaneously to ward elections.
- 1.3.4.2 Section 53 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 allows Councils to alter the years for ordinary elections for Parish Councillors. A resolution to move to whole Council elections need not affect the Parish Council elections unless the Council decides to make an order so that Parish Council elections coincide with District Council elections; this is not an obligation.
- 1.3.4.3 Due to the cost implications and to ensure the electoral process remains as simple as possible, it is recommended that if the Council moves to

whole Council elections, Parish Council elections should also change to be held at the same time as Borough Council elections.

1.3.5 Single Member Wards

1.3.5.1 Section 55 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 states that a local authority can only make a request to move to single Member wards if it has whole council elections. Members of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that it would be appropriate to consider this option at the same time as the whole Council elections issue so that if Members agreed to request a Boundary Review, any changes could be made to coincide with a change to whole Council elections from 2011.

1.3.5.2 Currently, 18 wards in Maidstone are multi-Member and 8 are single-Member.

1.3.5.3 As with whole Council elections, there are a number of advantages and disadvantages with single Member wards:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Clarity of leadership.</p> <p>The Elections Centre associates low voter turnout with large wards; single Member wards are smaller.</p> <p>Can provide a point of unity between several communities.</p>	<p>Multi-Member wards allow parties to field a range of candidates which may be more representative of the population.</p> <p>Multi-Member wards have practical advantages, for example if one ward Councillor suffers from illness, ward residents still have access to an elected representative. Also, multi-Member wards can be considered beneficial for those areas represented by the Leader or a Cabinet Member, as those Members have greater responsibilities and workloads than other local ward Members.</p>

1.3.5.4 A change to single Member wards would require significant officer time, funding and major planning. If Members believe a change to single Member wards would be appropriate, a request would need to be made to the Boundary Commission to review the possibility of implementing single Member wards. This can only occur if the Council agrees to move to whole Council elections.

1.4 Alternative Action and why not Recommended

1.4.1 Council could decide not to consider the report and its recommendations, however this is not considered desirable for the following reasons:

- The Council has already agreed to consult interested parties with regard to a potential move to whole Council elections: this report provides further information on this topic to ensure that Councillors and residents can make an informed decision; and
- The report has identified further issues around elections, including election turnout, the cycle of parish council elections, and single Member wards, which should be addressed to ensure that the Council’s approach to reviewing the electoral cycle is inclusive.

1.5 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.5.1 Consideration of the recommendations as outlined within the report would support the following Key Objective:

“Encourage greater citizen participation, especially in registering to vote, elections and Council meetings and promote greater engagement with Council members”.

1.6 Risk Management *COMPULSORY*

1.6.1 There are no risks that arise as a result of the report.

1.7 Other Implications

1.7.1

1.	Financial	X
1.	Staffing	
2.	Legal	X
3.	Equality Impact Needs Assessment	
4.	Environmental/Sustainable Development	
5.	Community Safety	
6.	Human Rights Act	
7.	Procurement	
8.	Asset Management	

1.7.2 If the Council agrees to consult on the issue of whole council elections, funding will need to be allocated to this.

1.7.3 Any potential change to the cycle of elections or ward boundaries, if a move to single Member wards is approved, will need to follow the

processes outlined in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

1.8 Background Documents

1.8.1 *Whole and Partial Council Elections Report (2009)* External Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Cycles in English Local Government (2003) Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre

The Cycle of Local Government Elections in England (2003) Electoral Commission

NO REPORT WILL BE ACCEPTED WITHOUT THIS BOX BEING COMPLETED

Is this a Key Decision? Yes No

If yes, when did it appear in the Forward Plan? _____

Is this an Urgent Key Decision? Yes No