

ELECTORAL CYCLE IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE

(Report by Head of Administration)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Council has undertaken elections by thirds since its inception in 1974. It has been possible since for the Council to pass a resolution to ask the Secretary of State to make an order to change the system to whole council elections and vice versa, subject to an interval of not less than 10 years between requests. Legislative change introduced by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 enables the Council to resolve to change its electoral cycle at certain fixed periods of time and to implement certain consequential changes.

2. CHOICE

2.1 Non-metropolitan district councils have the choice of elections by whole council or by halves or thirds of their membership. Huntingdonshire historically has elected by thirds with one fallow year when no district election is held which is the year of the county council election.

2.2 The summary position in England is –

Authority type	Thirds	Halves	Whole	Total
County Council	-	-	34	34
District/bor. council	82	7	149	238
Unitary council	19	-	27	46
London borough	-	-	33	33
Metropolitan borough	36	-	-	36
Parish/town councils	-	-	8,700	8,700

3. NEW PROCEDURE

3.1 Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, districts that historically elected by thirds can move to whole council elections and can revert back to thirds. Other authorities that have whole council elections now cannot move to thirds. The same situation pertains to authorities that historically elected by halves. However authorities cannot move from thirds to halves and vice versa.

3.2 If an authority wishes to move from thirds to whole council elections, it must

- ◆ consult such persons as it thinks appropriate on the proposed change,
- ◆ convene a special meeting of the Council,
- ◆ pass a resolution to change by a two thirds majority of those voting,

- ◆ publish an explanatory document on the decision and make this available for public inspection, and
 - ◆ give notice to the Electoral Commission.
- 3.3 The authority may also request the Commission to give the Boundary Committee a direction to undertake a review of the authority's area with a view to establishing single member wards, where it considers this to be appropriate.
- 3.4 An authority that elected by thirds and has moved to whole council elections may return to elections by thirds. To do so, it must carry out the same procedure as set out in paragraph 3.2, except that the Commission must make an order to that effect and, before doing so, must consider whether to direct the Boundary Committee to carry out a review of the district in question. That review would look at the division of the district into wards with a view to the desirability of establishing three member wards.

4. TIMESCALES

- 4.1 There is a 'permitted resolution period' for authorities that wish to change their electoral cycle. In the case of Huntingdonshire, a resolution must be passed no later than 31st December 2010. The whole council election would then be held in May 2011. The next opportunity to change will be between the annual meeting in May 2014 and 31st December of that year and then during the same interval every fourth year thereafter. If a resolution were to be passed at any time in those permitted resolution periods, the first whole council elections would take place in 2015 and each fourth year thereafter.
- 4.2 If the authority moved to whole council elections and then wished to move back to thirds, the permitted resolution period is between the annual meeting in May 2012 and 31st December 2012 and every fourth year thereafter. The first election by thirds would happen in the year after the Electoral Commission made the order, except that 2013 and every fourth year thereafter would be a fallow year when no district election would take place. The likelihood is that the cycle of elections would be 2015, 2016, 2018, etc.

5. PARISH COUNCILS

- 5.1 Currently, town and parish council elections in Huntingdonshire coincide with the district election for the ward in which they are located. Roughly one third of the towns and parishes therefore have elections in any year except in the year of county council elections. A schedule showing the dates of elections to the various town and parish councils in the District is shown in Annex A. The cost of a contested election is shared between the Council and the relevant town or parish, where possible.
- 5.2 If the Council resolve to move to whole council elections in 2011 and every fourth year thereafter, those towns and parishes with elections that fall in the two years in the cycle when there will no longer be district council elections would have to meet the whole of the cost of

their individual elections. Similarly, the District Council itself would have to meet the whole of the cost of its own election in those wards where no town or parish council is held.

- 5.3 Although contested town/parish council elections have become increasingly rare in recent years, other than in the towns of Huntingdon, St Ives and St Neots, a contested election is currently a prerequisite for those councils which are quality parishes to retain their status and the transfer of additional powers and responsibilities to towns and parishes recently may encourage more individuals to stand as candidates.
- 5.4 The 2007 Act enables the Council to make an order to alter the years of the ordinary election of towns and parishes so that they coincide with a move by a district council to elections by whole council or a reversion to elections by thirds. The order can make transitional provision for the retirement of town and parish councillors at different times than would otherwise apply during that transitional period.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 A move to whole council elections will clearly lead to a financial saving for the Council. As part of the exercise to identify savings in 2006, the Council has already agreed to include whole council elections in the schedule of cuts to services. However the saving will not equate to the whole of the cost of an election in two of the three years of the current cycle.
- 6.2 Currently, the District is divided into 29 wards. Although elections are by thirds, only 4 wards comprise 3 councillors. 15 have two councillors and 10 are single councillor wards. This results from the need to achieve electoral parity of an equal number of electors per councillor with the most recent periodic electoral review only succeeding to create 3 member wards in Eynesbury, Huntingdon East, Ramsey, and Yaxley and Farcet. In very few wards therefore is an election held each year.
- 6.3 Although the electoral split between wards is equal at the moment with 17 wards having elections in two out of three years and 18 wards in the third year, the cost of an election varies with the number of polling stations per ward. This varies from a minimum of 1 station per ward up to a maximum of 11. The current electoral cycle of 63, 73 and 54 stations in each of its three years (as shown in Annex B) directly affects the cost of the annual election in each of those years.
- 6.4 A move to whole council elections would result in all 106 polling stations being required in each election, representing an increase of 45% compared with the busiest year currently. Similarly all 29 wards would have elections, an increase of 61% on the current position. It is likely therefore that the direct cost of a whole council election would be some 50% higher than in the most expensive of the three current years of the cycle with a saving in the other two years. By-elections also would be more frequent because these could no longer be organised to coincide with annual elections.

- 6.5 Based upon current figures, it is estimated that a saving of approximately £100,000 could be achieved across a four year cycle. However this will vary depending upon the number of contested town and parish council elections that are held. Parliamentary elections have also coincided with district elections in recent years which has enabled costs to be shared, most recently in 2005. A whole council election in 2011 would be out of sequence with general elections and they would be unlikely to coincide for the foreseeable future. Finally the cost would be influenced by the creation of more single member wards.

7. BOUNDARY REVIEW

- 7.1 If the Council considers moving to whole council elections, it will need to decide whether to ask the Commission to implement a boundary review. Ideally, councils where elections are by thirds have three member wards and those with whole council elections have single member wards. The latter tends to focus on the performance of an individual councillor as the representative/champion of his or her ward as opposed to the situation in a multi-member ward. As mentioned above, the last periodic electoral review of the District resulted in a predominance of two member wards to achieve electoral parity. Because of the geographical composition of Huntingdonshire, it is unlikely that single member wards can be created throughout the District without resulting in some unusual ward configurations. Conversely, this would present an opportunity to redress some of the more contrived ward structures that arose from the last review.

- 7.2 A move to all single member wards clearly would generate 52 wards, unless the size of the council changed, with the probability of additional polling stations being required. This could add up to £50,000 to the cost of an election, halving the saving over the electoral cycle.

8. RELATIVE MERITS

- 8.1 A series of arguments can be advanced for the merits and disadvantages of whole council elections and elections by thirds. The Electoral Commission carried out a consultation exercise at the request of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003 and recommended that authorities move to whole council elections. Conversely the Government had only a few years earlier advocated annual elections as a way of stimulating public interest in local democracy.

- 8.2 A summary of the various merits and disadvantages of the two systems are contained in the attached Annex C.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The recent legislative change encourages authorities to move towards whole council elections. Those currently electing by thirds or halves can move to whole council elections but those operating the latter system at the time when the Act was passed now cannot change.

- 9.2 The merits of elections by thirds and by whole council are equally balanced but the financial saving is not as great as may be first envisaged, especially if a review is requested which implements single member wards and an opportunity to share costs with a general election is lost. It also would mean that a third of the membership of the Council who were elected in 2010 would have to stand for re-election again in 2011 and those elected in the most recent election in May 2008 only serving three of their four year term of office. A similar situation pertained after the last periodic electoral review which changed ward boundaries.
- 9.3 Any decision on the part of the Council would inevitably require the electoral arrangements of the towns and parishes in Huntingdonshire to change to bring their individual years of election into line with that of the District. Depending upon the transitional arrangements that the Council included in the order, this could mean either a shorter or longer period of office for the councillors affected.
- 9.4 Before a special meeting of the Council could be held to consider a resolution for change, it would be necessary to consult with appropriate bodies which could include existing councillors, the political parties, town and parish councils and others. If the Panel is minded to consider a move to whole council elections, it may wish to review the outcome of that consultation before submitting proposals to a special meeting of the Council.

10. RECOMMENDATION

- 10.1 The Panel is asked to consider a move to whole council elections before the current deadline of the end of December 2010 and the consequential implications for the Council, individual councillors and town and parish councils.
- 10.2 In the event of the Panel favouring whole council elections, it is also invited to consider -
- ◆ the implementation of a consultation process with interested parties and the determination of whom to consult;
 - ◆ preliminary consideration as to whether to ask the Electoral Commission to direct the Boundary Committee to carry out a review of the District with a view to the creation of single member wards; and
 - ◆ the consequential implications for town and parish councils, the making of an order to change the year of election for a majority of those councils and any transitional arrangements arising therefrom.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

Polling arrangements for County, District and Parish Councils in Huntingdonshire.