
Report to

Cabinet

9 September 2008

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

10 September 2008

Council

16 September 2008

Report of

Director of Customer & Workforce Services

Title

Coventry City Council's Response to the Ministry of Justice's Consultation on "Weekend Voting"

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 The report seeks agreement for the Council's response to the Ministry of Justice's Consultation on Weekend Voting.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Cabinet are asked to consider the response contained in this report and, if deemed appropriate, to recommend the City Council to approve it, for submission to the Ministry of Justice by the deadline of 26 September 2008.

2.2 The Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee are asked to consider the response and forward their views (by way of a briefing note) for consideration by the City Council at their meeting on 16 September 2008.

2.3 The City Council are asked to formally approve the response, subject to their incorporation of any comments they deem appropriate made by the Cabinet and/or the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee.

3. Background

3.1 One of the Government's strategic aims is that people should be able to exercise their right to vote with ease and without unnecessary barriers. Its objective is to ensure voting processes are accessible, convenient and easy to use without compromising security.

3.2 The consultation aims to promote debate on the merits of moving election day from Thursday to the weekend, and on the best way to do this.

3.3 The government is also keen to hear views on the following forms of advance voting and whether these would be acceptable alternatives to election days being held on a Thursday or may usefully support election days at the weekend:

- a) advance voting at polling stations.
- b) use of advance and remote voting over the internet/telephone.

3.4 Current legislation requires local elections in England to be held on the first Thursday in May. There is no statutory requirement for Parliamentary Elections to be on a Thursday but cannot be held on 'dies-non' i.e. weekends, bank holidays, etc.. Any move of local or Parliamentary elections in England and Wales would mean elections held on different days in different parts of the UK. Under his current powers, the Secretary of State could set weekend voting for European Parliamentary elections, but the rules for conduct of the election would need to be amended to allow weekend voting.

4. The Consultation

4.1 The consultation is in the format of a series of questions and these are detailed below. Each question is then followed by some further information and a response which requires approval.

4.2 The government has also requested views on whether greater access to advanced voting should be made available alongside or in addition to weekend voting.

1. *Do you think that polling day should be:*

***A weekday a Saturday a Sunday
or take place over both Saturday & Sunday
Why?***

- The government suggests that a Thursday is not the most accessible day for voting for working people. Trends in working patterns – hours worked, shift work, long commutes to work, and other factors suggest that the electoral process does not fit in with modern lifestyles as many people may spend little time in the locality of their polling station. Changing to weekend voting would improve access and opportunities for voting although it is noted that people are also busy at weekends.
- A move to weekend voting may increase turnout but there is no reliable evidence to support this. Young people are cited as those who would prefer weekend voting. Other measures are also suggested to increase the convenience of voting in order to incentive non-voters to vote.
- For those European countries with weekend voting, Sunday is the most favoured day. However, there may be a need to extend voting over Saturday and Sunday to accommodate various religious communities. However, if voting was held over two days polling hours could possibly be reduced (currently 7am – 10pm).

Response: This council is not in favour of weekend voting. There is no reliable evidence or strong argument contained in the consultation paper that weekend voting is any more accessible than voting on a Thursday or that the change will increase turnout . Changing the day of the poll will not in itself encourage those electors who are currently apathetic to the democratic process to go out and vote . in addition, there is no evidence that current polling hours need to be extended over 2 days.

2. Who would be affected by changing the voting day to a weekend and how?

- Moving to weekend voting could present other barriers associated with lifestyles/culture. Those with religious concerns about voting on a Saturday or Sunday. Individuals with caring responsibilities who may have reduced support at weekends. Those who regularly go away from home at weekends.
- Reduced public transport for those requiring to use it to get to polling stations.

Response: This Council concurs that moving to weekend voting could present other barriers associated with lifestyles/culture. Sunday voting would bring its own difficulties in terms of getting to the polling stations using public transport.

3. Do you think that greater access to advance voting in polling stations should be made available alongside weekend voting? Please explain why?

- A pilot of advanced voting in was held in Coventry in 2000 where electors could vote in the run up to the election. We located 3 portacabins in the precinct to act as a polling station. This proved popular with those who could vote whilst doing their shopping but did not appear to incentivise non-voters as turnout did not increase.
- Advanced voting could be used to counteract the need to move to weekend voting if a Thursday is not the most accessible day for voting for working people.

Response: Greater access to advance voting could enhance voting. However, it is not exclusive to weekend voting and could just as easily enhance ease of voting on Thursdays.

4. Do you think that greater access to remote voting (whether through traditional postal voting or by electronic means) should be made available alongside weekend voting? Should such arrangements be explored even if polling day were not moved to the weekend? Please explain why?

- Since the 2000 Act, postal voting has become available to all for an indefinite period. If telephone/internet voting were introduced – these could potentially take place either before or on polling day, together with advanced voting in person at a polling station then this would satisfy the need of electors preferring not to vote on a particular day.
- Remote voting assists with the inconvenience of having to vote on a particular day and would apply to voting on a Thursday as well as voting at a weekend.

Response: Again these initiatives do not have exclusivity with weekend voting and should be explored separately to the merits in moving to weekend voting.

5. What do you perceive to be the benefits and the drawbacks of remote voting?

- Introduction of other forms of remote voting gives electors a choice regarding the way in which they cast their vote and when. They are not tied to a particular day.
- Voting in person has been long established and is perceived to be relatively secure by the electorate. This is not the case with postal voting which has been severely criticised. Would this also be case with other forms of remote voting if introduced?

Response: Remote voting, particularly electronic voting, is more likely to appeal to the younger voters but there is a greater mistrust of all types of remote voting amongst the older established electorate.

6. *Should the Government pilot weekend voting before introducing it across the UK?*

Response: YES, all new initiatives should be piloted prior to them being introduced as part of the mainstream process.

7. *What other issues may arise if the polling day is moved to the weekend? What are the issues for;*

Response:

i) Resources?

Electoral Services Staff are not normally contracted to work weekends and would require a re-negotiation of current contracts with a possible loss of experienced staff. Other staff recruited for the election itself may not want to work weekends, especially if the hours of poll remain at 7 am till 10 pm or the election is held over 2 days. If the count is held on a Sunday at close of poll, staff may not want to work late into the night. If it is held over to the Monday it may be difficult to recruit staff as this is a normal working day.

Weekend voting would be more expensive, there would be a need for enhanced rates for staff and possibly for hire of buildings. Paying outside companies to work when they are normally closed would incur extra costs. Any new burdens on local authorities would need to be funded appropriately.

ii) Polling station venues?

Private buildings for polling stations may not be available at weekends e.g. Church Halls and count venues. Whilst this could be offset with more use of schools without disruption to teaching it may still result in further travel to buildings that are available.

The sports hall may not be available for the count due to heavy usage on Sundays. There are concerns that Coventry might not be able to find a suitable alternative venue in this case.

iii) Security?

There are potential issues surrounding the security of documents and ballot boxes if voting is extended over 2 days. Another issue is the length of time Presiding Officers may need to store ballot papers and registers prior to them being used in the polling station. Currently they are collected the day before polling. For a Sunday poll this would be a Saturday, Council Offices are closed and currently they do not receive any payment for this collection. This may not be the case if they needed to collect them on a Saturday as this may be a further disruption to some staffs' leisure time.

iv) Administration of the election?

In addition to a potential lack of staff wanting to work at weekends and insufficient polling stations / count venues being available, there are other logistical problems. At weekends, offices and other companies are normally closed, e.g. Council Offices being closed, no IT support, delivery of equipment for

setting up count. Also the return of postal votes at weekends – special arrangements would need to be negotiated to ensure that postal voters returning ballot papers closer to polling day are not disenfranchised, so compromising the result.

8. If weekend voting is introduced for local government elections, do you agree that the normal time for holding these elections should be moved from the first Thursday in May to the second weekend in May?

If not please explain which weekend you believe it would be the most appropriate for these elections to be held and why.

Response: This council is not in favour of weekend voting. The current Thursday voting does not interfere with the May Bank Holiday or the current annual cycle of councils.

5. Other specific implications

	Implications (See below)	No Implications
Best Value		✓
Children and Young People		✓
Climate Change & Sustainable Development		✓
Comparable Benchmark Data		✓
Corporate Parenting		✓
Coventry Community Plan		✓
Crime and Disorder		✓
Equal Opportunities		✓
Finance		✓
Health and Safety		✓
Human Resources		✓
Human Rights Act		✓
Impact on Partner Organisations		✓
Information and Communications Technology		✓
Legal Implications		✓
Neighbourhood Management		✓
Property Implications		✓
Race Equality Scheme		✓
Risk Management		✓
Trade Union Consultation		✓
Voluntary Sector – The Coventry Compact		✓

6. Timescale

6.1 Responses to the consultation are required by the MOJ by 26 September 2008.

	Yes	No
Key Decision		√
Scrutiny Consideration (if yes, which Scrutiny meeting and date)	√ Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee 10 September 2008	
Council Consideration (if yes, date of Council meeting)	√ 16 September 2008	

List of background papers

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Papers open to Public Inspection

Description of paper	Location
Ministry of Justice – Consultation paper on Weekend Voting	CH 16