Timing of the Implementation of Whole Council Elections – Impact and Considerations

Option 1

Scheduled Local Election 4 May 2023

The council has scheduled standalone local elections on 4 May 2023. Following the passing of the Elections Act 2022, Voter ID requirements are due to be introduced in polling stations for any scheduled or unscheduled polls across England in 2023. Below are some key considerations in relation to the timing of whole council elections along side the introduction of Voter ID.

Operational factors to consider:

- In addition to the increased financial resources required for whole council elections, there will also be a significant cost implications for the implementation of Voter ID. The DLUHC has confirmed new burdens funding, but the specifics around what the funding will be is yet to be determined.

- It will be necessary to increase staff resources at polling stations to help administer and manage the Voter ID process, to reduce queues and ensure the voting process is still as efficient and smooth. There will also be the requirement for privacy screens in all polling stations.

- For whole council elections, ballot papers will be larger due to the number of candidates. This will impact on the printing costs and resource costs for staff proofing and checking all ballot papers and postal vote packs.

- Whole council elections will require an alternative method of counting the votes. "Multimember" counting for all 24 wards. This will increase the length of the count and increase the cost of counting assistants and other count staff. Additional costs are detailed in the main body of the report.

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- Additional training will be required for all polling station staff to cover all of the Voter ID requirements and all count staff for whole council elections. Currently all counting assistants are issued with a training video detailing the "first past the post" counting method. It will be necessary to physically train all 260-count staff face to face to ensure that there is a robust understanding of the "multimember" counting process.

- The timing of the Verification and Count will need to be reviewed to consider counting the following day not overnight given the length of time that "multimember" counting may take.

Risks

With any introduction of new electoral legislation, there are a number of risks associated with implementation the introduction of Voter ID, that electoral teams could face in 2023. Whilst mitigations will be in place, should council resolve to implement whole council elections in 2023, it is important to highlight those risks and their impact.

- The inability to recruit staff given the changes and new challenges they face in managing polling stations.

- Availability of count staff should the verification and count spread across a number of days.

- Voter apathy and confusion given the changes to the processes potential disenfranchisement with unsuitable ID being presented.

- Insufficient funding to support local authorities to deliver Voter ID effectively

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- Unscheduled polls are a continued risk, a "snap" UK General Election could be called in 2023. Combined polls increase risk impact on resources.

Summary

The bullet points listed above highlight some of the key operational considerations and risks associated with a change to our electoral cycle in 2023. It is important to note that whilst the change to whole council elections combined with Voter ID does present many challenges, adequate planning, and adequate levels of funding and staffing resources will mitigate the challenges and allow for the successful delivery of the elections.

Option 2

Scheduled Combined Local, Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and Combined Authority Mayoral (CAM) Elections 2 May 2024. UK Parliament election not scheduled but proposed for 2024.

The council has scheduled three-way combination elections in May 2024. This will see Voter ID in polling stations for the second year. Below are operational considerations and risks should council resolve to implement "whole council elections" in 2024.

Operational factors to consider:

- In addition to the additional financial resources required for whole council elections there will also be a significant cost implication for the implementation of Voter ID. The DLUHC has confirmed new burdens funding, but the specifics around what the funding will be is yet to be determined.

- The scheduled PCC and CAM elections will require the local authority to cover the cost of the three-way combination elections until the funding is claimed back from the Electoral Claims Unit. This would also be the case in the event of a "snap" UKPGE.

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- It will be necessary to increase staff resources at polling stations to help administer and manage the Voter ID process, to reduce queues and ensure the voting process is still as efficient and smooth. There will also be the requirement for privacy screens in all polling stations.

- For whole council elections, ballot papers will be larger due to the number of candidates. This will impact on the printing costs and resource costs for staff proofing and checking all ballot papers and postal vote packs.

- Whole council elections will require an alternative method of counting the votes. "Multimember" counting for all 24 wards. This will increase the length of the count and increase the cost of counting assistants and other count staff. Additional costs are detailed in the main body of the report.

- Additional training will be required for all polling station staff to cover all of the Voter ID requirements and all count staff for whole council elections. Currently all counting assistants are issued with a training video detailing the "first past the post" counting method. It will be necessary to physically train all 260-count staff face to face to ensure that there is a robust understanding of the "multimember" counting process.

- The timing of the Verification and Count will need to be reviewed to consider counting the following day not overnight given the length of time that "multimember" counting may take.

- A three- or four-way combination will require counting over a 4-day period. Although the Elections Act has introduced the "first past the post" counting method for the PCC and CAM elections, which will reduce the complication, the length of time required for counting will be significantly impacted.

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- The law still requires a UKPGE to be counted overnight. In the event that the general election is combined with the elections in May, this will require significantly more staff resources to be able to verify all four polls and start counting the general election within the statutory requirements.

Risks

The risks detailed above in Option 1 apply in both scenarios should members resolve to introduce whole council elections

However, the number of scheduled elections in 2024 present a significant difference. All combination elections carry additional risk, the risk increases with the numbers of combinations. 2024 will see a minimum of a three -way combination and this could increase to four with a UKPGE.

- The inability to recruit staff given the changes and new challenges they face in managing polling stations.

- Availability of count staff should the verification and count spread across a number of days

- Voter apathy and confusion given the changes to the processes potential disenfranchisement with unsuitable ID being presented. Voter confusion will increase with the number of ballot papers presented to them and the differences in the method of voting. The ballot papers for Whole council elections will be larger and the voter will be required to "vote for three".

- Insufficient funding to support local authorities to deliver Voter ID effectively with an increased burden of funding a several combination elections. Funds are claimed back from central government (Electoral Claims Unit) following submission and approval of a full set of accounts for each election.

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- Combined unscheduled polls are a continues risk, there is the significant possibility that a "snap" UK General Election could be called in 2024 and combined in May.   Differences in legislation, impact on resources new will increase risk to the delivery elections given a three- or four-way combination poll alongside Voter ID and whole council local elections.

Summary

The above points highlight the additional risk associated with combination elections, Voter ID and the introduction of whole council local elections simultaneously. The impact of a change to the electoral system in 2024 is significantly higher when compared to 2023, the main reason being there are no scheduled combination elections in 2023. The successful delivery of the elections in 2024 will be predicated on robust planning, and adequate staffing and financial resources.