

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 22 JUNE 2022 FROM 7.30 PM TO 8.15 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Caroline Smith (Mayor), Beth Rowland (Deputy Mayor), Sam Akhtar, Keith Baker, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Bowring, Shirley Boyt, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Stephen Conway, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, David Davies, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Maria Gee, John Halsall, David Hare, Peter Harper, Pauline Helliars-Symons, Graham Howe, Chris Johnson, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Tahir Maher, Morag Malvern, Charles Margetts, Rebecca Margetts, Adrian Mather, Andrew Mickleburgh, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Alistair Neal, Jackie Rance, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle and Shahid Younis

20. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Parry Batth, Anne Chadwick, David Cornish, Phil Cunningham and John Kaiser.

21. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

22. Public Question Time

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Mayor invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Member.

22.1 Tony Johnson asked the Leader of the Council the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance:

Question

In the calculations for the costs of running elections, the standard "How Much will it cost / save" statement on the attached papers is zero for Years 1 - 3, yet in Appendix A there's a cost of just over £4 million allocated to "Disruption".

Please can you help the public understand exactly how the £2.032 million cost per year figure has been arrived at?

Answer

I think you are referring to this table here? None of these things that we are talking about tonight are going to happen in the current financial year, the next financial year or the following financial year. So how much it will cost/save, the answer is indeed zero for those.

In answer to your question about how did we get to the £2.032 million, all I can say is that how did we get there? The number that was calculated as a tangible saving

from three elections over a four year period versus one every four years, which is £316,000. This equates to £79,000 per year. The figure includes such things as the cost of staffing and the facilities needed to run events, including polling stations and printing costs. However, there is an estimate of a less tangible cost at £1million per year. This is the approximate cost of the opportunity of the Council not moving forwards with the Council's overall business as a result of disruption caused by having annual elections. I am informed that the less tangible costs were made from a high-level estimate made in consultation with the Council's Corporate Leadership Team. It is an estimation of the impact on Council business that is not taken forward as a result of the focus on Elections in the months building up to them, including the period known as Purdah, and similarly the focus after the elections formulating and orientating the new Administration of Councillors. This figure should be taken in the context that it is only 0.2% of the Council's annual size of business and that it is only an opportunity cost and therefore it actually does not translate into real cash. We also need to respect that the Council is not a commercial business and lots of its functions are not done for financial gain. It is here to serve the needs of our residents and must remain fully accountable to the public that it serves. Therefore, we cannot accept financial savings as being the only motivator to change our current system.

So, for clarity, the amount per year of tangible combined with less tangible costs, is just over £1 million not £2.032 million per year.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for providing the answer to my question on behalf of the Council. You use the words 'estimate' and 'not real' as well as 'tangible', so my question comes almost in two parts based on those two items.

On the one hand if it is real then why did the Council not put in place an improvement programme to save that circa £1 million a year over the last 20 years under Conservative administration? If on the other hand it is a mathematical inexactitude, then why is it along with any other inexactitude sent to Members but not the public around 8.30am yesterday morning? Why was it released for this debate under a Liberal Democrat led administration?

Supplementary Answer:

I am assuming that you are referring to the report that was sent to Councillors and not publicly available? I am afraid I am not sure I really have an answer for that one because I think you are referring to something which is not in the public realm. Maybe that is the question. We can give you a written answer.

23. Electoral Cycle Decision

The Council considered a report regarding the Electoral Cycle.

The Mayor reminded Members that in order for the recommendation to be agreed, it required two thirds of those Members present at the meeting, to vote in favour.

The report was proposed by Clive Jones and seconded by Stephen Conway.

Clive Jones commented that the meeting marked the end of the process of considering whether the Council wished to move from elections by thirds to all out elections, every four years, which had begun prior to the Election. He found himself in the unusual position of proposing a recommendation which he would be voting against. Clive Jones felt that that elections by thirds provided a greater level of accountability, reduced the possibility of wholesale changes and losing a lot of experience at the same time, and gave the electorate more involvement in decision making. He was of the view that all out elections disadvantaged smaller parties and independent candidates, and highlighted that retaining elections by thirds required all wards to be of the same size with three ward Members.

Andy Croy disagreed with the proposal to move to all out elections. He highlighted the importance of moving to larger wards, which he believed created greater equity.

Keith Baker commented that 3,067 responses had been received to the consultation, only 1.08% of the Borough's population. In addition, the results had been close. He referred to the number of comments made under each option. He was of the view that cost should not be an influencer on how democracy was run. Keith Baker believed that whilst Wokingham was only one of sixteen unitary councils which elected by thirds it was important to do what was right for residents and that elections every four years weakened democratic accountability.

Prue Bray expressed concerns around the consultation and many people's understanding of it when responding. She emphasised that four yearly elections tended to favour larger parties and highlighted some of the benefits of retaining elections by thirds.

Gregor Murray felt that the consultation response highlighted that residents wanted to move to all out elections, and that this should not be ignored. He emphasised that all residents had been given the opportunity to respond to the consultation.

Gary Cowan commented that research into the benefits of the different electoral cycles was limited and that which did exist was from some time ago. He disagreed that there was confusion amongst younger voters and those of black and ethnic minorities around the voting systems.

John Halsall emphasised that the Council could not continue with its current system. He commented that it was more difficult for Councillors to be known by their residents within a larger ward and that they should be local champions. He believed that moving to all out elections was in residents' best interests and would save money.

Rachel Burgess felt that moving to all out elections would erode democracy and accountability. She was of the view that the consultation material and consultation process had been flawed.

At this point in the meeting, 8.01pm, Prue Bray proposed that in accordance with Rule 4.2.12n) the time limit for the item (as set out in 4.2.2.1) be extended by 30 minutes to enable all those who wished to speak to the item to do so. This was seconded by Stephen Conway. Upon being put to the vote the proposal was

agreed.

Pauline Jorgensen commented that the situation was finely balanced with arguments on both sides. Whilst she personally liked elections by thirds and single Ward Members this was no longer an option. Residents had responded to the consultation and indicated that they wished to move to all out elections. With regards to the consultation material, Pauline Jorgensen emphasised that the wording of the consultation had been produced by the Monitoring Officer.

Pauline Helliard-Symons was of the view that moving to all out elections would save a considerable amount of money which could be spent on other valuable services. Within her ward, Oaklands Schools had to close each time there was an election in order to be a polling station, which was very disruptive to children and their families.

Stephen Conway stated that consultations did not confer the same democratic mandates as elections did and that consultations helped Councillors to make an informed, rounded judgement. With regards to the cost of the current system, identified by the Chief Financial Officer, many were intangible, mainly representing staff time, which would not constitute a cash saving should a change be made to the system. The tangible saving estimated between 2024-27 of £316,000, represented an annual saving of £79,000.

In accordance with Rule 4.2.15.5, a recorded vote was requested. Voting was as follows.

FOR	AGAINST	ABSTAIN
Sam Akhtar	Keith Baker	
Laura Blumenthal	Rachel Bishop-Firth	
Chris Bowring	Shirley Boyt	
David Davies	Prue Bray	
Michael Firmager	Rachel Burgess	
John Halsall	Stephen Conway	
Peter Harper	Gary Cowan	
Pauline Helliard- Symons	Andy Croy	
Graham Howe	Peter Dennis	
Pauline Jorgensen	Lindsay Ferris	
Norman Jorgensen	Paul Fishwick	
Abdul Loyes	Jim Frewin	
Charles Margetts	Maria Gee	
Rebecca Margetts	David Hare	
Stuart Munro	Chris Johnson	
Gregor Murray	Clive Jones	
Jackie Rance	Sarah Kerr	
Wayne Smith	Tahir Maher	
Bill Soane	Morag Malvern	
Alison Swaddle	Adrian Mather	
Shahid Younis	Andrew Mickleburgh	
	Alistair Neal	
	Beth Rowland	

	Ian Shenton	
	Imogen Shepherd-DuBey	
	Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey	
	Caroline Smith	
	Mike Smith	

RESOLVED: That the proposed change to the electoral cycle to all out elections every four years from 2024, be not progressed.

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