

## ITEM NO: 15

<b>DECISION-MAKER:</b>	COUNCIL		
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	WEEKEND VOTING		
<b>DATE OF DECISION:</b>	17 <sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2008		
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	SOLICITOR TO THE COUNCIL / RETURNING OFFICER		
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### STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

None.

### SUMMARY

To consider whether and if so how to respond to the Government consultation document on weekend voting

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (i) To note the content of the Government's Consultation document "Election Day: Weekend Voting" (placed on deposit in Members' Rooms and summarised in this report); and
- (ii) To approve the draft response set out in Appendix 1.

### REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government has issued a consultation document seeking views on whether the UK should hold its Local, General, and European Elections on weekends in a move which could make it easier for more people to vote. Responses need to be made to the Ministry of Justice by 26<sup>th</sup> September 2008. A copy of the full report has been placed in Members' Rooms.

### CONSULTATION

2. This is a consultation document, and the Council's views are being sought.

### ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

3. There are a range of options to the consultation questions being asked.

### DETAIL

4. The Governance of Britain Green paper published July 2007 made a series of proposals aimed at forging constitutional renewal. Amongst them the government promised to consult local authorities on the implications of moving the voting day for general and / or local elections from Thursday to the weekend. This consultation document from the Ministry of Justice entitled "*The Governance of Britain: Election Day Weekend Voting*" begins the consultation on this proposal and also considers the prospect of weekend voting for European parliamentary elections.
5. The government is looking at measures which would reverse the trend of falling turnout at elections including looking at removing any physical barriers

which make it easier for more people to vote. They suggest that moving to weekend voting could be more convenient to working people and that Thursdays may be inconvenient to many, including those who may work at some distance from the district in which they live. However, the document notes that people are also busy at weekends. If weekend voting were to be adopted this could run on the second weekend in May so as to avoid a clash with the May Day bank holiday weekend. The Government would also welcome suggestions as to other possible weekends which may be more appropriate.

6. The proposals are based on the supposition that implementing them will increase voter turnout. However the document acknowledges that there is no reliable evidence to suggest that this would be the case. Young people are cited as those who would prefer weekend voting. In the absence of any evidence to support this supposition, the Solicitor to the Council / returning officer recommends a somewhat cautious approach, given the practical, logistic and cost implications of these proposals.
7. Religious objections may be raised to weekend voting and the document acknowledges this. The Government has proposed a compromise of two voting days on both Saturday and Sunday to overcome these objections. However, the costs and administration difficulties that arise from spreading voting over more than one day would need to be considered.
8. Issues around the availability of school, community and church halls at weekends are considered. In addition, securing ballot boxes and other election material could be an issue for voting over two days.
9. Advance polling has been widely available in the form of postal voting on demand (except Northern Ireland) since 2000. The government is seeking views on whether to extend advance polling to include advance voting at polling stations (which was trialled by a number of authorities in 2007 including Bedford, Broxbourne, Gateshead, Sheffield and Sunderland). This would also have resource implications for local authorities. Remote electronic voting is also considered and the government is seeking views on whether this should be more widely encouraged. Trials were held at a number of local elections in 2007 including Rushmoor, Sheffield, Shrewsbury and Atcham, South Buckinghamshire and Swindon which encountered significant issues at the time.
10. Voting in person has been long established and whilst it may no longer be convenient there are a number of advantages and disadvantages which the document highlights.
11. The following factors need to be considered:
  - issues arising from the use of churches and religious buildings for polling stations and restrictions on weekend usage. Out of the 96 polling stations used in the May 2008 elections in Southampton 29 of them were Churches/religious buildings and 9 were schools. The introduction of weekend voting would have a considerable impact on obtaining suitable venues to use as polling stations;
  - UK's systems for postal ballots have been severely criticised by a number of observers (including the Council of Europe which act as

international election observers) for allowing the possibility of fraud to take place;

- older people and those who voted in the last general election have a preference for retaining the tradition of voting on Thursdays;
- counting combined elections for weekend voting would involve elections staff working more days, the stress and working hours would be difficult to manage, and the practicalities would mean that results would take longer to deliver;
- additional costs to local authorities especially if having to pay weekend/Sunday rates would be considerable;
- Royal Mail do not operate the same services at the weekends which will have an impact on the delivery of late PV's and could lead to disenfranchisement;
- other suppliers do not ordinarily work weekends (Xpress/CAPITA etc.). This may lead to late issues not being resolved, reduced / nil support during polling days and/or the Count or (a more likely scenario) if provided an additional cost implication for local authorities; and
- people who want to vote are accustomed to making arrangements on the weekday and some employers even acknowledge the need for slightly late/early starts to accommodate this. At weekends people are less likely to give up their time to vote as they will be engaged in other activities.

12. There is a common perception that changes to make voting easier, particularly through the use of postal, electronic or digital voting combined with this proposal to shift polling day to a weekend or setting up polling stations in places people go naturally, such as shopping centres, is a positive step to take, both reflecting the nature of the idea as a good one, but also that these arrangements fit in more appropriately with today's lifestyle and expectations. There is however little evidence to suggest that such procedural changes will make any difference to the level of voter turnout / achieve greater democratic engagement. There are clearly pros and cons to moving polling day from a Thursday to a weekend day or days, but justifying this on the basis that such a move will increase voter turnout at this stage is unproven, and for that reason the Solicitor to the Council / Returning Officer's draft response is cautious (Appendix 1).

## **FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

### **Capital**

13. Nil .

### **Revenue**

14. Nil - if these proposals were implemented in whole or in part, there would be a fairly significant revenue demand (relative to the elections budget) upon the Council to meet these new obligations, that is impossible to quantify until the

details are known.

**Property**

15. None

**Other**

16. None

**LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Statutory power to undertake proposals in the report:**

17. Representation of the People Act 1983 (as Amended)

**Other Legal Implications:**

18. None

**POLICY FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS**

19. None

**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

**Appendices**

1.	Draft Response to Consultation Paper
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**Documents In Members' Rooms**

1.	Election Day – Weekend Voting Consultation Paper
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**Background Documents**

Title of Background Paper(s)	Relevant Paragraph of the Access to Information Procedure Rules / Schedule 12A allowing document to be Exempt/Confidential (if applicable)
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**Background documents available for inspection at:**

**FORWARD PLAN No:**

**KEY DECISION?**

<b>WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED:</b>	
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