



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Action Note from the visit to Bassetlaw on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

#### Present:

Cllr Andrew Marchington

Cllr Cathy Scott

Steve Brown, Head of Corporate Services

Ros Theakstone, Director of Corporate Services

Julie Briggs, Democratic Services Manager

Cllr Simon Greaves, Leader of the Council

Cllr Jo White, Deputy Leader of the Council

#### In Attendance:

Sharon Salvanos, Electoral Services Manager

Alaina McGlade, Governance & Democratic Engagement Officer

### **Summary of comments/discussion**

- 1,2 and 3 Member wards
- 48 councillors
- 115,000 population, 88,000 electorate

### **Drivers to change cycle of elections**

Bassetlaw council advised that historically the council had elected in thirds and that there had not been any issues in this approach. However, the schedule of elections was out of sync with other neighbouring Authorities in Nottinghamshire, which had led to some public confusion. The main driver for the change to all-out elections was from Elected Members and related to the savings that could be realised. Elected Members had identified that changing the cycle of elections was an area where they could contribute to the overall savings required across the council.

A motion was submitted to the full council meeting in June 2014, instructing officers to look into the move to all-out elections and also reducing the number of councillors in each Ward. There was no clarity or outcome identified for the option to reduce the number of Ward councillors. The move to all-out elections was identified to be implemented in 2016, however, throughout the initial consultation exercise, the question was asked as to why this change could not be implemented sooner, if such obvious savings could be made. The decision to move to all-out elections as soon

as practicable was fully supported by all Elected Members at a council meeting held on March 2015 and this change was implemented in May 2015. This change was also supported by the trade union (UNISON).

### **Consultation**

The council undertook two consultation exercises, comments received during the initial period of consultation raised issues as to why the council was delaying implementation until 2016. Following the second consultation exercise the date for implementation was brought forward to 2015.

The council undertook the following methods of consultation:

- Information on website
- Advice to Parish Councils
- Presentations delivered across the area
- Advice from other councils

Since the change there has been minimal public interest or comment in relation to the change to electoral cycle. The Police and Crime Commissioner elections and the EU Referendum were held in 2016 and there will be the County Council elections in 2017 so the public may not notice any break in electoral cycles.

### **Impact of change**

The Council has only delivered one district election which was at the time the change was implemented in 2015.

The all-out election in 2015 was combined with the UK Parliamentary Election. It was noted that the voting pattern (turnout) for the UK Parliamentary Election had an impact on the turnout for the District Election, as would be expected.

There was some concern regarding the potential loss of expertise of staff and also the availability of buildings used for polling stations, due to the reduction of frequency to the electoral cycle. However, the council advised that as there had been other elections scheduled since 2015 and they had not experienced any difficulties to date.

The move to all-out elections had also enabled the council to extend the cycle of council meetings from 4 to 6 weekly, this was as a result of not having a delay to decision making during Purdah. The council also have the flexibility to hold extraordinary meetings, if required, to differentiate between the items that are considered within the longer cycle of decision making and for those standalone items that require individual focus. Further savings have also been realised through the change to the frequency of council meetings.

### **Learning points**

The council advised that there had been a higher number of customer queries received during the 2015 election as some electors were confused at having up to 3 choices on the ballot paper. They also advised that some electors had chosen not to

block vote and there were a higher number of 'unused votes'. The Leader of the Council advised that they had communicated advice on the change, however, that this was an area the council would place more focus on in advance of the all-out elections schedule to take place in 2019.

The council had factored in the risk of an increase of by-elections in the intervening periods; however, it was too early to know whether this would occur and how any increase of ward by-elections might impact on the budget.

The change to all-out elections had been communicated to the Parish Councils, however, at the time they had not been able to meet the timescale approved by the council. Parishes had struggled to attract enough candidates.

### **Impact on Elected Members**

The council advised that there were no standing councillors not re-elected. It was explained that the Labour Party had a majority and the Conservative Party had only been able to nominate one candidate for each ward.

### **Impact on staff**

It was advised that there had been no impact on electoral staff due to the fact that an election had still been held each year since the change to the district council electoral cycle and there had also been an increase in electoral work (Individual Electoral Registration) which has required the staffing numbers to remain the same.

The financial savings had amounted to approximately a 50% saving, with the majority of savings being achieved from staffing at polling stations, accommodation, postal vote printing and postage. The council has aligned Parish Council elections to same cycle as the District Council elections to avoid the Parish Council incurring full costs. Bassetlaw council do not re-charge the Parish council for the administration of their ordinary elections. However, Bassetlaw do re-charge for any by-elections.

The consistency of leadership resulting from the change to the election cycle has enabled officers to understand and respond to the longer term direction of travel as determined by Cabinet and this has resulted in the more stable environment.

### **Impact on Governance**

The council felt they had become a stronger council following the move to all-out elections, as the struggle to make decisions through Purdah had been reduced. The Deputy Leader advised that when the idea was first moved in the Labour Group, she has been initially reluctant, as she felt the yearly contact with the electorate was important. However, she explained that she had come to recognise that the council, and particularly the leadership, required the 4 years of consistency to achieve long term plans. She explained that maintaining the relationship with the electorate was still important however, it was the role and responsibility of councillors to maintain and develop such relationships and it did not need an election to be held to maintain effectively contact and relationship with the electorate.

The reduction in the cycle of meetings had not impacted on the day-to-day work of agenda planning, particularly in relation to well defined items for example the budget as these just slotted into the process.

It was explained that the move to all-out elections had provided the council with a greater opportunity for consistency of strategic decision making and for councillors to develop a higher level of understanding of their portfolio.