



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET – 10 JANUARY 2022
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 8
Subject	PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL ELECTION COSTS
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Mike Evemy, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance Email: mike.evemy@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Robert Weaver, Returning Officer Email: robert.weaver@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	<p>This report sets out the proposal to consider the option of recharging the costs of elections to Town and Parish Councils. This would bring Cotswold District Council in line with all other Local Authorities across Gloucestershire and most in the South West, where Town and Parish Councils meet the costs associated with elections in their areas.</p> <p>The proposals are being tabled in light of the significant financial pressures all local authorities, including Cotswold District Council are currently facing, both nationally and locally and the need to best manage those financial pressures.</p> <p>Clearly this means that the Council needs to continue to consider carefully how to manage its finances. Where there is scope to reduce costs, it is sensible and prudent to look to do so.</p> <p>This report was initially tabled for the December meeting of Cabinet. However following concerns from Town and Parish Councils (predominantly around a feeling that there had been insufficient communication with them on the proposal) it was agreed to defer the item until the Cabinet meeting on 10th January 2022.</p> <p>In the intervening period, and as a result of the concerns raised, Town and Parish Councils were invited to attend two virtual conversations with the Leader, Deputy Leader, Chief Executive and Elections Manager. In addition Alison Robinson, Chief Executive of the Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town councils, (GAPTC) was also present. The purpose of these virtual meetings was to:</p> <p>To listen to the concerns of those attending, and seek to provide answers to questions raised</p>



	<p>To explain the rationale behind the Cabinet paper and intention to charge (from both a national and local finance context)</p> <p>To provide further clarity on how the proposed election fees had been generated, including a step by step run through presented by the Elections Manager.</p> <p>27 members of Town or Parish Councils attended the virtual meetings, including two Ward Councillors.</p> <p>These virtual meetings were very informative. It was clear that there was a strong feeling from those who attended that there should have been more proactive communication about the proposals. It was also apparent that attendees felt more time to allow Town and Parish Councils to prepare and plan for meeting any costs associated with elections would be welcome, ideally as part of a phased financial approach and over a longer time period than originally proposed (from May 2023).</p> <p>The outcome of these conversations and further consideration following the deferral, has resulted in the revised recommendations set out below.</p>
Annexes	<p>Annexe 1 - Indicative costs for Town and Parish Council Elections</p> <p>Annexe 2 - Estimate of recharge costs per Town/Parish Council</p>
Recommendation(s)	<p><i>(a) That the Cabinet agrees to recharge Town and Parish Councils for contested 4-yearly elections at a rate of 50% of their share of the cost in 2023 and 100% of their share in 2027 and thereafter</i></p> <p><i>(b) That the Cabinet agrees to recharge Town and Parish Councils for contested by-elections taking place on or after the dates shown at the rates indicated:</i></p> <p><i>(i) from 01/04/2024 - 50% of the cost</i></p> <p><i>(ii) from 01/04/2025 - 75% of the cost</i></p> <p><i>(iii) from 01/04/2026 - 100% of the cost</i></p>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivering our services to the highest standards
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Whilst there is no requirement under Section 35 and 36 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to formally consult on the proposals set out in this report, Town and Parish council engagement on



	the proposals has taken place since the agreement to defer the item, with a view to better understanding and responding to their concerns.
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I. BACKGROUND

- 1.1.** The Council has a clear policy with regard to setting fees and charges. It expects service charges to reflect as a minimum the cost of providing services. Where services are provided at a fee which is lower than cost, clear policy decisions will be taken. In line with this policy, it is necessary and proportionate for the Council to consider recharging third parties for services they receive from the Council.
- 1.2.** As part of the process of managing Council finances, and in light of the preceding paragraph, Section 36(5) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 gives District Councils the discretion to either charge each local Council in full or in part for election costs or bear the costs itself.
- 1.3.** The Returning Officer uses a County-wide agreed scale of fees and charges for staffing costs at elections. Cotswold District Council ("the Council") has previously endorsed this scale and agreed to its implementation for all local elections. The Returning Officer is given delegated authority to update the scale in line with the cost of living pay rise each year. In addition, the actual and necessary costs are met by the District Council such as polling station hire, poll cards, postal vote packs, ballot papers.
- 1.4.** In 1996, the Council agreed to absorb the cost of all Town and Parish Council Elections except Parish Polls rather than recharging individual Councils for the costs. As such at present reserves are allocated each year to build up a fund for the 4-yearly District and Parish Elections. This fund also covers the cost of any by-elections which take place during the term. If the recommendation were to be agreed, the allocation could be reduced by the appropriate amount.
- 1.5.** Parliamentary and Police & Crime Commissioner Elections are funded by Central Government and County Council Elections are funded by the County Council. Neighbourhood Planning Referendum costs are not included in election costs and will continue to be funded by the Neighbourhood Planning Grant provided by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
- 1.6.** Where elections are combined, costs are split between the areas and charged back to the relevant Authority/Government.
- 1.7.** District and Parish/Town elections take place every 4 years and consist of 32 District Wards (for 34 seats) and 97 separate Parish/Town elections.
- 1.8.** In 2019, all the District wards were contested along with 18 Parish/Town councils or wards of councils. Of the remaining Parishes/Towns, 79 were quorate and co-opted the remaining seats and 2 did not have sufficient nominations to be quorate. Further elections were required for these two and resulted in uncontested elections.



- 1.9.** In 2015, there were 17 contested Parish/Town Council elections along with the fully contested District wards.
- 1.10.** When a casual vacancy occurs in a Parish/Town Council, a notice of vacancy is published. This gives electors an opportunity to request an election to fill the vacancy. If no request is received, the Parish/Town council can co-opt to fill the vacancy. If an election is requested it is conducted by the Electoral Services Team and the cost is currently absorbed by the District Council.
- 1.11.** The following table shows the number of casual vacancies since the 2015 full elections:

	Number of notices of vacancy	Elections requested	Co-option
2015 - 2019	165	16 of which 11 were contested	149
2019 - 2021 (as at 14.12.21)	138	15 of which 6 were contested	123

- 1.12.** At present, the full cost of all elections is met by the District Council. The estimated cost across 4 years is £150,000 for the main elections plus approximately £50,000 for contested by-elections at either District and/or Parish/Town level. This is an estimated cost as it is dependent on the number of by-elections taking place during the term.
- 1.13.** Where a Town/Parish by-election takes place on its own, the Town or Parish may choose whether to issue poll cards (s25 The Local Elections (Parish and Communities) Rules 2006, as amended). Whilst the District Council has met the cost of Town and Parish elections, the Returning Officer has automatically issued poll cards as this is seen as best practice. However, should the recommendations be implemented, the Town/Parish Council will be asked whether they wish to issue poll cards.
- 1.14.** Where an election is combined, poll cards are automatically issued and the costs shared between the elections taking place.
- 1.15.** As part of the consideration to recharge Town and Parish Councils, a request for information on election charging was made through the Association of Electoral Administrators to Local Authorities in the South West. The following responses were received, highlighting that Cotswold District Council is unusual in considering charging Town and Parish Councils for their elections.



Authority	4-yearly elections	By-elections	Comments
Cheltenham	Yes	Yes	County scale of fees
Cornwall	Yes	Yes	
Cotswold	No	No	
Forest of Dean	Yes	Yes	There is a threshold for charging based on the precept of the parish
Gloucester	Yes	Yes	
Mid Devon	Yes	Yes	
North Devon	Yes	Yes	
North Somerset	Yes	Yes	20% added to by-election cost for administration
Sedgemoor	Yes	Yes	
Stroud	Yes	Yes	
Tewkesbury	No	Yes	
Torridge	Yes	Yes	

2. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 Election costs are calculated according to the scale of fees along with actual costs for poll cards, ballot papers, postal vote packs, venues etc.
- 2.2 The cost therefore varies according to the size of the Parish/Town, the number of electors and whether the election is held on its own or combined with another type of election e.g. Parish and District election on the same day.
- 2.3 As an example, the election held on 7 October 2021 for Stow-on-the-Wold Town Council cost in the region of £4,000 for 1,613 electors.
- 2.4 At combined elections, costs will be split between elections - some costs will be split 50/50 e.g. polling station hire, whilst other costs such as ballot papers will be charged in full to each election type.
- 2.5 At the 2019 elections, the total cost of all District and Parish elections was £125,000. The table below shows the approximate costs for each Parish Council/Ward where there was a contested election along with an estimate of what could have been re-charged to Town/Parish councils if 100% of the re-chargeable costs had been passed on to the Parish/Town councils with contested elections.
- 2.6 These estimates are based on the number of electors, postal votes, polling stations and staff. They also include an amount per elector for printing and stationery.



Parish/Town Council	Number of electors	Full cost of District and Parish election £	Potential recharge cost to Parish/Town Council £
Beverston Parish	112	1,044.00	468.00
Bibury Parish	499	2,393.00	947.00
Cirencester Town, Abbey Ward	1899	8,393.00	3,184.00
Cirencester Town, Four Acres Ward	1556	7,039.00	2,694.00
Cirencester Town, Stratton Ward	2070	8,673.00	3,282.00
Cirencester Town, Watermoor Ward	2081	8,836.00	3,355.00
Driffield Parish	119	1,192.00	536.00
Hatherop Parish	137	1,175.00	518.00
Longborough Parish	383	1,996.00	801.00
Maugersbury Parish	115	1,004.00	442.00
Moreton-in-Marsh Town	3691	14,440.00	5,405.00
Rendcomb Parish	183	1,177.00	494.00
Shipton Moyne Parish	224	1,350.00	563.00
Somerford Keynes Parish	404	1,993.00	789.00
Southrop Parish	210	1,272.00	526.00
Stow-on-the-Wold Town	1644	7,194.00	2,747.00



Tetbury Town Council	4659	19,386.00	7,316.00
Upper Rissington Parish	1404	5,744.00	2,200.00
		94,301.00	36,267.00

A full list of estimated costs for combined and standalone parish council elections is shown in Annex I.

3. TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT

- 3.1** At the Cabinet meeting on 6 December, it was clear that some Town and Parish councils felt there had not been enough time for them to understand and consider the implications of recharging prior to the publication of the report.
- 3.2** As a result, the Cabinet deferred a decision on the proposal to its meeting on 10 January 2022 to allow time for discussion and communication with Town and Parish councils to take place.
- 3.3** Town and Parish Council Clerks and Councillors and Ward Councillors were subsequently invited to attend one of two virtual ‘conversations’ hosted by Cllr Joe Harris, together with Cllr Mike Every, the Chief Executive and the Elections Manager. These online conversations were set up with the following aims:
- To listen to the concerns of those attending, and seek to provide answers to questions raised
 - To explain the rationale behind the Cabinet paper and intention to charge (from both a national and local finance context)
 - To provide further clarity on how the proposed election fees had been generated, including a step by step run through presented by the Elections Manager.
- 3.4** 27 members and clerks of Town or Parish Councils attended the virtual meetings, including two CDC councillors who are also town councillors. (Cllr Patrick Coleman and Cllr Nikki Ind) In addition, Alison Robinson, Chief Executive Officer for the Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils (GAPTC) was invited to attend, and provided some valuable context and insight.
- 3.5** The meetings were, with the permission of those attending, recorded. The full recordings can be provided upon request.



SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES FROM DISCUSSIONS WITH TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

- 3.6** Some attendees felt the District Council should continue to meet the costs of local elections across the District, being in a better position to budget for such expenses that the Town or Parish Councils were.
- 3.7** Some felt that with the uncertainty on how frequently or otherwise a local election may arise, it would be difficult to estimate how much to consider raising the precept to cover such eventualities.
- 3.8** The majority of attendees felt that there had been a lack of communication with Town and Parish Councils on the proposals to introduce charging. Many felt this put them in a very difficult position, having already set their precepts and that the proposals went 'against the grain' of looking to develop better communication and relationships between the towns/parishes and the District Council.
- 3.9** Whilst most attendees made it clear they would prefer that Cotswold District Council did not introduce charging as proposed and set out in this report, most also understood the principle/reasoning following the presentations and subsequent discussion around the national and local financial context.
- 3.10** Helpful local context was provided by GAPTC noting that Cotswold District Council was the only Council in Gloucestershire that met all costs associated with town and parish council elections. From a GAPTC perspective, the key issue was the proposed timeline associated with introducing these charges (which appeared unreasonable in terms of lead in times and to allow for precept budgeting) and whether there was scope to consider a phased approach to passing these costs on to the Town and Parish Councils. Some attendees shared the view that a greater amount of lead in time and a phased approach would be far more appropriate.
- 3.11** Attendees found the Election Manager's presentation helpful, as it provided clarity on the likely costs associated with local elections. There were a number of specific questions following the presentation, (including how the fees and charges associated with elections were set - whether this was done locally or nationally, whether the fees were subject to VAT and whether the estimate of costs provided, represented the maximum fees likely to be associated with the specific elements of running an election - which it was confirmed they did. A breakdown of estimated charges for parish/town councils of various sizes was provided by the Elections Manager and is shown as Annexe 2 to this report.
- 3.12** It was agreed that the presentation given by the Elections Manager at the virtual sessions would be shared with all Town and Parish councils via email.



3.13 It is therefore proposed that following the conversations with Town and Parish Councils and further consideration;

- *That the Cabinet agrees to recharge Town and Parish Councils for contested 4-yearly elections at a rate of 50% of their share of the cost in 2023 and 100% of their share in 2027 and thereafter*
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- *That the Cabinet agrees to recharge Town and Parish Councils for contested by-elections taking place on or after the dates shown at the rates indicated:*
 - *from 01/04/2024 - 50% of the cost*
 - *from 01/04/2025 - 75% of the cost*
 - *from 01/04/2026 - 100% of the cost*

The proposals above, would result in an estimated saving to the Council of approximately £50,000 over the four years 2023/24 to 2026/27 and £90,000 over the subsequent four years.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** Other than the legal issues referred to there are no other legal implications arising directly from this Report.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1** There is a risk that the Parish/Town Councils would be unable to meet the cost of elections. However, they are able to precept for these costs. Giving as much notice as possible and phasing in the level of costs to be charged to the Parish/Town Councils will help alleviate this risk.
- 5.2** There is also a need to reduce reputational risk by making sure that the proposal and consequent decision is communicated effectively and in a timely manner to the Parish/Town Councils.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1** There are four additional options that could be considered, as detailed in the table below, together with the financial implications associated with each option. The estimated costs are based on a full district election with 18 contested Parishes/Towns being £150,000 plus £50,000 for by-elections across the 4-year term. The recommendation outlined in 3.13 above is a variation of option 4 below.



Option		Split of costs	Cost to District Councils (across 4 years)	Cost to Parish/Town Councils
1	No change to current arrangements	District Council absorbs all costs	£200,000	£0
2	Recharge Parish/Town Councils for contested 4-yearly elections but not by-elections	District Council splits costs for 4-yearly elections with contested parish/towns. District Council meets cost of any Parish/Town By-elections	Approximately £160,000	Approximately, £40,000 (based on estimates given above)
3	Recharge Parish/Town Councils for by-elections but not 4-yearly elections	District Council absorbs the cost of 4-yearly elections. Costs for By-elections are met by relevant Parish/Town Council	£150,000	£50,000
4	Recharge Parish/Town Councils for all elections with combined elections split across election types	4-yearly election costs split between District and Parish/Town. By-election costs met by relevant Parish/Town Council	£110,000	£90,000

(END)