

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO POLICY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: TUESDAY, 27 JANUARY 2015
title: PARISH POLLS
submitted by: CHIEF EXECUTIVE – MARSHAL SCOTT
principal author: BILL ALKER – COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To inform the Council of consultation on the modernisation of Parish Polls with the aim of bringing the process up to date which will also make the process more transparent.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Community Objectives – New arrangements for Parish Polls will ensure that they are run in a more democratic manner than has been the case in the past. Ribble Valley Borough Council has always tried to help Parish Councils and Parish meetings carry out their democratic functions.
- Corporate Priorities – Good governance and arrangements are at the core of what this Council does.
- Other Considerations – None.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Parish Polls are a tool which local communities can use to gauge local reaction to a particular issue which has arisen at a Parish meeting and which will have an impact on the local community. Whilst such polls are non-binding, they do provide an indication of support for, or opposition to, specific Parish matters which can help guide Parish Council decision making.

2.2 Parish meetings are public meetings held in parishes at least once a year. They are separate from the meetings of the Parish Council itself. In Parishes with a Council Parish meetings must happen at least annually and give an opportunity for all voters to raise and discuss issues of relevance to the Parish although its votes are non-binding.

2.3 In Parishes which are too small to have a Parish Council the Parish meeting must happen at least twice year and form the decision-making body for this Parish.

2.4 A Parish wide Poll can be called on any question that arises at a Parish meeting. The results of the Poll are non-binding but can be a useful means for the Parish Council to determine the views of local people on key issues.

2.5 Earlier in the current Parliament the Government received representation from groups such as the National Association of Local Councils and as a result included a section in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 which enabled the revision of the regulations governing Parish Polls.

- 2.6 A 2012 survey of 150 Parish Councils suggested that the cost of running a Parish Poll was in the region of £5,000 to £8,000 which can represent a significant demand on often limited resources of a Parish Council.
- 2.7 However at the moment it only requires one third (or 10 whichever is the lower) of those in attendance at a Parish meeting to trigger a Poll which has resulted in cases in which a smaller number of people can demand Polls to take place to pursue personal agenda.
- 2.8 The consultation paper gives an example of a Poll which was called by 10 of over 100 people present at a Parish meeting in a Parish with 25,000 voters and which resulted in a turnout of just 4%.
- 2.9 Where Polls take place there is no provision to use postal or proxy voting and ballots can only open between 4pm and 9pm. In addition the rules around what matters can be subject to the Poll are widely drawn with the result that Polls can potentially be called on questions not strictly the remit of Parish Councils.

3 ISSUES

- 3.1 The Government has made the following proposals to conclude that the regulations need updating and proposes to:
- increase the trigger for the number of electors needed to call a Poll to limit vexatious unnecessary or otherwise inappropriate use of the new trigger. This will be half those present at a Parish meeting, the number of which should constitute at least 60 voters or 10% of the number of voters in the Parish if this is less than 60;
 - update the voting arrangements to improve access and modernise the polling procedure to bring mechanisms in line with other local government Polls including ballot boxes being available from 7am to 10pm and voting being possible by postal or proxy voters;
 - more closely define the questions on which a Parish Poll can be held to enable questions which are appropriate to local issues;
 - a consultation paper with full details of the proposed changes, the rationale as to why the situation needs to be updated and the questions that the Government would like responses on along with details of how to respond has been published by the Department for Communities and Local Government on the 4 December 2014;
- 3.2 Parish Council's, Local Community Groups and individual Parish residents are strongly advised to read and respond to the consultation paper. In view of the limited time for response we have included a suggested response at Appendix A to this report which we ask Committee to endorse.

4 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 4.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications:
- Resources – None identified as the changes are not mandatory.
 - Technical, Environmental and Legal – None identified.

- Political – None identified.
- Reputation – It is important that this Council encourage local democracy at grassroots level.
- Equality & Diversity – The legislation will enable local communities to raise their concerns at a local level.

5. **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

- 6.1 Agree the suggested response to the consultation as set out at Appendix A to this report.

BILL ALKER
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

MARSHAL SCOTT
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Consultation document from Department of Communities and Local Government – December 2014.

For further information please ask for Bill Alker, extension 4412.

REF: BA/CMS/P&F/27 JAN 14/27011501

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

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Dear Sirs

CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ON PARISH POLLS

This Council wishes to comment as follows on the recently published consultation document issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government in relation to proposals to change the way Parish Meetings and Parish Polls are conducted.

1. We agree with the new measures proposed for the trigger ie the raising of numbers of electors who can trigger a Poll to 10% of local government electors for the community or 60 electors (if 10% of electors exceeds 60).

2. We also agree with the proposed changes to voting arrangements including extended hours of Poll, allowing same facilities for disabled voters as in other Polls, the combining of Parish Polls with other Polls where the Returning Officer deems it appropriate and a Parish Poll to be conducted in accordance with the same rules as for other Polls.

3. We agree to the closer definition of what subjects can trigger a Parish Poll; this will hopefully avoid Polls being demanded for matters which are not the correct province of a local or parish community.

Yours sincerely

MARSHAL SCOTT
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The Secretary of State
Department of Communities & Local Government