

Committee(s): Policy and Resources Committee	Date(s): 7 May 2020
Subject: COVID-19 Implications – possible postponement of the City-Wide elections in March 2021	Public
Report of: Town Clerk	For Decision
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Summary

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United Kingdom, the Government passed legislation suspending London Mayoral, Police and Crime Commissioner and local government elections until May 2021. These provisions do not apply to the City of London Common Council elections, the dates of which remain under the control of the Court of Common Council. The election for all Common Councillors, hereafter referred to as the City elections, are scheduled to take place in March 2021.

Given the national position and uncertainty about the length of time during which restrictions and effects on normal activities may be in place, a report has been requested outlining the possibility of holding the City elections on the same day as the rescheduled elections for the London Mayor and the Greater London Assembly (GLA).

There are legal implications associated with elections, therefore this report has been prepared in consultation with the Comptroller & City Solicitor's Office.

Holding the City elections on the same day as the GLA's presents a number of complications in relation to the hours of poll, the location of polling stations and conducting the count, amongst other things. These are set out in more detail in the main body of this report for discussion and it is not a course of action recommended by officers.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to agree, that:-

1. for the reasons set out in this report, the City elections are not combined with the London Mayor and GLA elections; and
2. to consider either retaining the current election dates in March 2021 or moving the date of the election to, for example, early July 2021.

Main Report

Background

1. The City of London elections are due to be held on 17 and 18 March 2021. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United Kingdom, legislation has been passed to suspend all local government elections until May 2021. These provisions do not apply to the City elections.
2. The purpose of this report is therefore to present Members with relevant information in order to consider whether the elections scheduled for March 2021 should remain as is, be held on the same day as the GLA elections in May 2021 or be postponed until early July 2021.

Options

3. As mentioned, there are three options for the Committee to consider:-
 - to retain the current date of the elections in March 2021.
 - to hold the City elections on the same day as the rescheduled elections for the London Mayor and GLA. Thursday 6 May 2021. The implications of this are outlined below. It is complicated and presents a number of difficulties. Consequently, changing the date to coincide with the GLA is not one which your officers would recommend.
 - to consider postponing the City of London elections to a later date, such as the early July, which would allow for the completion of the GLA election timetable before publication of the Notice of Election for the City of London elections. If Members were minded to support a postponement to a later date, an Act of Common Council would be required to effect this change. Officers would recommend that the elections be held on 30 June/1 July 2021, allowing the elections to be held before the end of the Summer term for City's family of schools.

It should be noted that a change along these lines would also mean altering the date of the meeting of the Court of Common Council at which the constitution of committees and election or appointment to those committees are dealt with, from April to September 2021.

Holding City Elections on the same day as the rescheduled London Mayor and GLA Elections

4. There are a number of complicated factors associated with rescheduling the City Elections to take place on the same day as the London Mayor and GLA Elections. These are set out in turn below.

Hours of Poll

5. Polling stations for the GLA elections are open between the hours of 7am and 10pm. The hours of poll for the City-wide elections are between 8am and 8pm. These hours of poll are set out in Section 5 of City of London Ballot Act 1887, as amended by Section 11 of the City of London (Various Power) Act 1957 changing to coterminous hours would require primary legislation. The legislation states that the polling stations '*shall not be kept open later than the hour of eight in the afternoon*', and it would therefore not be possible to extend the hours of poll. Retaining separate polling hours would have an impact on residents who are eligible to vote in both elections as they would not be able to cast their vote in the City elections if they turn up to vote outside the City hours of poll.

Location of polling stations

6. Residents are able to vote at one of four polling stations for the GLA elections, St Bride's Foundation Institute, St Giles Cripplegate, Artizan Street Library or the Sir Ralph Perring Centre. 26 polling stations are used at the City elections, which would mean that all residential electors would be required to attend two locations in order to vote in both the GLA and City elections. This would be onerous and is highly likely to cause confusion.
7. Whilst consideration could be given to using City polling stations for the GLA elections, the boundaries of the polling districts for Ward elections are different to the polling districts used for the GLA elections. As required by the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2006), a comprehensive review of the boundaries of the polling districts, polling places and polling stations would need to be undertaken in order to change this. A review of this nature would usually take about six months and would have an impact on the polling district boundaries for all future elections until the next review, which is due to take place in 2024. The last comprehensive review was conducted in 2019 and it concluded that no changes were required to the existing four polling districts.

Wardmote and declaration of results

8. The counts for City elections take place in the Ward, at the polling station, after the close of poll. This would not be possible if the GLA elections were held in the same location as the City elections. Firstly, the polling station would still be in use for the poll for the GLA elections as these close at 10pm as opposed to the poll for City elections which close at 8pm. This would also have an impact on our choice of polling stations as a number of the venues currently used do not have a separate room in which the count could be held.
9. Secondly, when multiple elections are held in the same location, the ballot boxes for those elections would need to be opened at the same time in case ballot papers have been placed in the wrong box. This is complicated by the fact that the GLA boxes cannot be opened until 8am on the Friday morning. The Senior Elections Programme Manager at the GLA has advised that no City election count could be concluded until all of the City boxes had been opened and checked at the count venue so that any ballot papers that had been placed in the incorrect ballot box

could be included in the count for the correct contest. In addition, if the City's count is not held until Friday 7 May, there could be an additional cost for the hire of count venues for each Ward.

10. Lastly, City Corporation's elections team do not have the capacity to attend the count for all Wards, therefore, election specialists from elsewhere in London are engaged to assist with this. If the City's and GLA elections were held on the same day this would not be possible adding a layer of risk to our count process. 23 elections specialists attended the counts in 2017.

Polling station equipment

11. The City of London uses polling station equipment belonging to neighbouring authorities for the City-wide elections. In 2017, this included 75 ballot boxes, 28 polling booths, 56 pavement signs and 56 large wall signs. If the election were to be combined with the GLA elections, this equipment would be in use and unavailable for use by the City of London. Based on the requirements of the 2017 elections, the Corporation would need to purchase this equipment at a cost of approx. £20,166.25, broken down as follows:-

Equipment	Cost
75 ballot boxes	£1,946.25
28 polling booths	£12,771.20
56 pavement polling station signs	£5,152
56 large wall polling station signs	£296.80

12. There would also be ongoing storage implications following the election.

Registration publicity

13. The Electoral Commission will run a publicity campaign in the lead up to the rescheduled polls in May 2021. This campaign will advertise the registration deadline for the GLA elections, which is 12 working days prior to the poll. This deadline does not apply to City elections, where the deadline for applying for inclusion on the ward lists is 16 December. The timetable for the preparation and publication of the ward lists is fixed by section 7 of the City of London (Various Powers) Act 1957 and cannot be altered without an Act of Parliament. In any event, such a change would lead to confusion for voters and businesses.

External print suppliers

14. The Coronavirus Act has postponed all elections due to be held in 2020 to 6 May 2021. This has already placed a large amount of work on election print suppliers both with regards to the various combinations of poll and volume of poll cards, ballot papers and postal votes to be produced. The poll cards and ballot papers for City of London elections are formatted in a different way compared to those outside of the City. The difference in hours of poll means that it would not be possible to combine the requirements of the City and that of the GLA. The City Corporation's usual electoral print supplier and that of the GLA have been

consulted and both have advised that holding the City elections on 6 May 2021 would be very challenging for them.

Core Elections team availability

15. The City Corporation's Electoral Services Manager also assumes the role of Deputy Returning Officer for the GLA elections and the Electoral Services team will have legal responsibilities to undertake for the GLA at peak electoral times. As mentioned, the polling hours for the GLA at election continues beyond the hours of poll for the City. Therefore, the electoral services team would still be assisting electors and managing the poll for the GLA.

Conclusion

16. As outlined above, there are multiple complications involved should Members decide to hold the City elections on the same day as the rescheduled GLA elections. The combination of polls would be very confusing for electors, as residential electors would need to attend two different polling stations in order to cast their votes in the different contests. The GLA elections have three separate ballot papers, so residential voters would need to complete four different ballot papers on the same day. Additionally, there would be confusion over the voter registration deadline. These elections would also be very difficult for the Elections Team to administer and there would be additional cost in purchasing equipment.

17. It is therefore strongly recommended that the City elections are not combined with the GLA elections, as mitigating the risks outlined in this report would be very difficult.

18. Members are therefore asked to consider either retaining the current election dates in March 2021 or to moving the date of the election to mid-July 2021.

Appendices

None

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