

# CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT

## EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

### POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 27 NOVEMBER 2003

### PILOTS AT EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2004

#### Report by Chief Executive

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to advise the Committee of two consultation exercises presently underway in regard to pilot voting schemes at the European Parliamentary Elections 2004 and to submit for consideration the Council's responses to these exercises.

#### 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Westminster Government has intimated that it intends to hold pilot voting schemes at the European Parliamentary Elections. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Consultation Exercise is concerned with obtaining views from Local Authorities and other interested parties on the proposed arrangements for piloting.

- 2.2 The ODPM has invited comments in particular on the following matters:

- the timetable or agreeing pilots and making the necessary arrangements;
- the arrangements for funding the cost of the pilot elections;
- the proposed format for the pilots, both all postal and e-voting;
- the publicity and promotion of the pilots to electors and specific groups;
- the requirements for evaluating the impact of the pilots; and
- the support and assistance that Local Authorities will need.

- 2.3 The government has intimated that it wishes to hold three all-postal pilots and for one of these pilots to also include internet and telephone voting.

- 2.4 The second consultation exercise is being carried out by the Electoral Commission and is inviting comments to inform the Electoral Commission's recommendations to the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, as to the location of any electoral pilot schemes to be held at the 2004 European Parliamentary Elections.

- 2.5 In making its recommendations the Electoral Commission will take into consideration the following:-

- the population and electorate size of the region;
- the geographical size and electorate density of the region;
- the number of Local Authorities in the region;
- the number of Local Authorities holding local elections in June 2004;
- the experience of the Local Authorities in holding pilots;
- the experience, capacity and willingness of the Regional Returning Officer and Local Returning Officers;
- achieving geographical balance and spread;
- the ability of other Agencies to deliver;
- fraud considerations;
- value for money;
- the ease of which discrete media public awareness campaigns can be organised;
- the risk of confusion arising from frequent changes to voting arrangements;
- for the electronic voting pilot area, the record of Local Authorities in delivering e-government services;
- for the electronic voting pilot area, access to relevant technology;

### **3. SCOTLAND**

**3.1** For the purposes of the European Elections Scotland is one of ten regions and there will be no other elections held within Scotland in June 2004.

**3.2** The Westminster Government believes that making voting easier and more convenient will increase voter participation. The above criteria for selection of regions suggests that Scotland has a good chance of being proposed. The Electoral Commission has said that "it is certainly a strong possibility..." that Scotland would be included in the pilot. "We think Scotland is one of them because there will be no risk of confusion with other Elections at the same time. Scotland would therefore be a good place to consider new methods of voting". However, the Committee are advised that no final decision has been made in this regard, and a number of practical concerns have emerged in relation to the very limited preparation time which would be available for a June 2004 election following completion of the legislative process.

### **4. SCOTTISH RETURNING OFFICERS**

**4.1** Scottish Returning Officers have recognised the need to support the Government and the Electoral Commission's initiatives in regard to making voting more accessible to the electorate. However, Scotland's Returning Officers have a number of serious practical concerns on the successful implementation of the pilot within the Government's existing timetabling.

**4.2** The concerns of Scotland's Returning Officers are of a practical nature and if not attended to could pose a risk to the successful conduct of the Election, the main concerns being:-

- the restrictive timescale between the passing of necessary legislation (projected for March 2004) and the commencement of the electoral procedures;
- the adequacy of Central Government funding to support the pilot;
- the ability of printers and other suppliers to process accurately and secure materials needed within the very short timescale available; and
- the significant change in the staffing implications.

**4.3** Accordingly, Returning Officers will be making separate submissions in this regard to the Government and the Electoral Commission.

## **5. CoSLA**

**5.1** CoSLA at a recent Leader's Meeting gave consideration to the consultation exercises and have agreed to support in principle Scotland's involvement as a region in a pilot all-postal ballot for the June 2004 European Elections.

**5.2** In taking this view CoSLA also recognised the serious practical concerns Returning Officers had with regard to implementation issues in what is considered an extremely tight legislative timescale and agreed that Government assurances should be sought on the robustness and achievability of associated mechanisms and CoSLA's submission to the consultation exercises will reflect these concerns.

## **6. CONSULTATION TIMESCALE**

**6.1** The consultation timescale in regard to the ODPM exercise requires submissions to be made by 12 November 2003. Submissions to the Electoral Commission's consultation exercise require to be submitted by 19 November 2003. Accordingly, an Officer submission has been made following consultation with the political groups of East Ayrshire Council and the Committee is required to ratify the submission as detailed within the recommendations of this paper.

**7. LEGAL/FINANCIAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS** - Nil insofar as this report is concerned

## **8. CONCLUSION**

**8.1** It is recognised that there will be a number of practical issues which it is suggested will be dealt with in some detail in the Scotland Returning Officer's submissions in response to the consultation exercise. However, an in principle view is required from the Council with regard to whether or not it supports Scotland's involvement as a region in a pilot all-postal ballot. Accordingly, it is suggested that the Council should give consideration to

CoSLA's lead in this regard and the recommendations to Committee reflect this.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **9.1 The Committee is asked:-**

- (i) to agree, in line with CoSLA, to support in principle Scotland's involvement as a region in a pilot all-postal ballot for the June 2004 European Elections;
- (ii) to recognise and support the practical concerns of Scotland's Returning Officers on the implementation of the electoral process within a seriously restricted legislative timescale as detailed in paragraph 4.2 of the report;
- (iii) to support CoSLA's request for Government assurances on the robustness and achievability of the associated mechanisms required to carry out an effective all-postal pilot ballot within Scotland including the provision of adequate funding;
- (iv) to note that Scotland's Returning Officers would be making specific detailed responses in respect of the consultation exercises; and
- (iv) to otherwise note the report.

David Montgomery  
Chief Executive

3 November 2003  
BW/SM

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. Consultation documentation from the Electoral Commission and the Office of the Depute Prime Minister.

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers relative to this report should contact Bill Walkinshaw, Administration Manager on 01563 576135. Any person wishing further information on this report should contact David Montgomery, Chief Executive on 01563 576002.