

# Amber Valley Liberal Democrats

## October 2019 Consultation Response: “Electoral Changes from Elections by Thirds to Whole Council Elections”

We are grateful to AVBC for the opportunity to comment. We note that there have been two previous consultations on this subject in the past ten years. The position of Amber Valley Liberal Democrats has not changed, and we repeat many points from our previous responses.

In summary, we are against the proposed change, and our primary concerns are the difficulties in finding candidates for a whole council election, and the democratic deficit for those turning 18 shortly after an election year.

### YOUNGER ELECTORS PARTICIPATION

- When elections are by thirds, new voters have a sooner opportunity to vote in local council elections after turning 18. Whereas for a whole-council election, a voter who turns 18 in May 2023 would not cast a vote for borough council until four years later in 2027 – just before their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.
- We consider this to be a contributing factor to voter apathy, and switching to whole council elections would create a further barrier to first-time participation, since if young people do not become engaged in politics from the outset, there is a risk they will not develop the habit of voting.
- It is Liberal Democrat policy to extend the right to vote to 16- and 17-year-olds, and if we succeed in lowering the voting age then we would hope that all voters get the chance to vote for their local council before their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### NEEDS OF SMALLER PARTIES

- This year, Amber Valley Liberal Democrats nominated 14 candidates for borough council wards, plus various candidates for parish councils. In order to fully contest the whole borough, we would have to find 45 candidates at once, which is not possible for smaller parties.
- After a whole council election, for candidates who were not successful, there is a risk that they drift away from local politics in the intervening years, which only exacerbates the problem into the next cycle.
- A key benefit of elections-by-thirds is that we can develop a candidate over multiple years standing in the same ward. This also encourages more positive aspects of campaigning – getting involved in community groups, doing year-round casework, and keeping in touch with the needs of voters.

## TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL SYNCHRONISATION

- Paragraph 1.5 mentions the cost sharing involved with Town and Parish Council elections that coincide with Borough Council elections. We note that even when elections are by-thirds, the polling days are shared on most years with other regional and national elections, though cost sharing arrangements are not mentioned in this consultation.
  - This year (2019) should have coincided with the EU Parliamentary elections
  - Next year (2020) are Derbyshire Police and Crime Commissioner elections
  - 2021 is the fallow year for Derbyshire County Council elections.
  - In the next cycle, 2022 should coincide with the next general election.

## INCREASED COST OF BY-ELECTIONS

- In paragraph 3, “Financial Implications”, the comparison is made between an estimated cost of £300k for Borough elections by-thirds in recent years, and an estimated £160k should these elections take/have taken place only every four years. We believe the cost assessment should also take into account the cost of by-elections:
- The expense of a typical unscheduled Borough by-election has not been published in the Consultation paper, but given a rough minimum cost per by-election of £70,000, and assuming the same number of by-elections per year as took place during the period April 2013 to April 2014, the overall costs of by-elections might be estimated at around £280,000 for the four-year cycle.

## TURNOVER OF COUNCILLORS

- Any one year of elections by thirds would only replace one third of councillors. This allows more continuity on the council, and new councillors can learn from their more experienced colleagues, gain procedural and organisational confidence, while working decisions can continue to be made well and with minimal disruption.
- There is a risk from whole council elections that it has potential to create a large number of new councillors at the same time. We note that it would be very easy for national politics to favour one political party at the time of a whole council election and they would have landslide control of AVBC. Lurching from red to blue and back again every 4 years offers no continuity, and we much prefer the current system where support must be earned gradually, and kept consistently.

## **VOTING METHOD**

- There is no mention in the consultation document as to the method of voting. One benefit of whole council elections might be that the council use the opportunity to move to a more proportional voting system.
- While no voting system is perfect, when we elect multiple members at the same time by first-past-the-post method it increases the above-mentioned risk that the highest polling national party will take all the seats, rather than the seats being distributed between parties according to their relative support.

## **DISRUPTION TO SCHOOLS**

- Paragraph 4 mentions the use of schools as Polling Stations. We are aware that AVBC has made efforts over recent years to reduce the number of school Polling Stations where possible, and the search for alternative venues is continuing. Given these facts, we do not believe that “less disruption to schools” is a substantial reason in favour of a four-year election cycle.

## **PERCEIVED EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO VOTE**

- The statement in paragraph 4 about equal opportunities to vote is an interesting argument in favour of adjusting Ward sizes and representation per elector, but not a valid argument for changing the frequency of elections.

## **COMPLEXITY OF THE COUNT**

- We are aware of some of the pressures on Elections staff, and would like to say how well elections are run by AVBC.
- A switch to all-up elections would also mean an increase in the size of ballot papers, with each party listing multiple candidates, and an increase in the difficulty for election services staff. We would expect the count to become more complicated, take longer, and have more risk of error.
- The elections team would also suffer from the reduced continuity, since the more complicated multi-member all-up elections would only take place once every four years. Currently, staff benefit from the regular experience of an election each year to maintain skills and procedural memory.

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